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*Unprofessional Tales*

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T. J. Perone Esq.

to a microcosmic  
illustration of the dangers  
of crooked thinking



# UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

*a*



# Unprofessional Tales

BY  
NORMYX



LONDON  
T. FISHER UNWIN  
PATERNOSTER SQUARE  
1901



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TO  
OUIDA



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# UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

## A Mystery

IT was a favoured morning in April, bright and balmy. The Park was crowded. A breath of violets floated upon the breeze, and the rustle of spring toilettes was mingled confusedly with light laughter and the thud of horses' hoofs crushing the soft earth. Two men, friends of long standing, suddenly encountered one another after a separation of many years. They sat down and discussed all that had happened to themselves in the long interval, looking up now and again to admire some pretty face or to greet an acquaintance in the coloured throng that moved ceaselessly onward before their eyes.

After some time, one of them said :—

‘I was extremely surprised to meet you. In fact, when I saw you first I thought it must be a ghost, for I understood you were still in Japan.

A

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And, curiously enough, I have been thinking a good deal about you lately. Some of these chance meetings are really very strange. There are coincidences that might almost make one believe in the supernatural.'

'Some of them,' replied his friend, 'are quite inexplicable. I will tell you of an experience that befell myself, and not long ago. Perhaps you can help me to understand it. You have heard me speak of my friend Ponomareff?'

'Often.'

'A man of heart and noble impulses. I look upon him as the embodiment of all that is best in the Russian character. After my return from Russia to England we wrote for a long time to one another, but the correspondence lagged and, in the end, ceased. I heard of him occasionally from mutual friends and often thought of him. I was thinking of him more particularly one evening in summer as I walked home from my club. I was on my way through London to the Continent. The streets were dusty and hot and noisome. It was at that time of the year, I remembered, that I had last stayed with him on his estate in the Tula Government. I thought of the many happy months that we had spent together in the patriarchal style of Russian country life. I remembered the laughing, round-faced peasants, the fragrance of the

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trees and the mild, long-drawn evenings. And I felt again that all-pervading charm of sadness, of yearning, that hangs in the pale Russian sky and penetrates to the very soul of the endless country. A sensation, not unlike home sickness, came over me.

‘Suddenly, as if my thoughts had actually conjured him up, Ponomareff himself accosted me. He was somewhat older, somewhat grey-haired, but otherwise unchanged in appearance. He said :—

“At last we meet, Ivan Ivanovitch! I have thought of you every day. But I cannot write letters. I cannot sit down to do anything. You know this is not idleness on my part.”

“I know.”

“But I am the same friend to you. You know the depths of my heart. You have conquered my heart long ago. Come and have supper.”

“I have just dined.”

“I also—never mind. I must have supper. There is a restaurant near at hand.”

“Serge Alexeievitch, you will ruin your digestion.”

‘We entered a restaurant unknown to myself. It was the “Parisian,” in Piccadilly. The first person I saw there was Sumner, the Academician, seated at a table by himself. I exchanged a few words with him and we passed on.



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‘My friend began :—

“How long it is since we have met! I only came to England to look at a mare of Carborough’s. But she is not up to my weight. Tell me all you have done. No, let me speak first—I have so much to say. In the first place, I have married her.”

“Anna Ivanovna?” I asked.

“You remember? Yes, the very same. Let us have some Clicquot. And now I have a proposal to make. Come back with me to-morrow to Vasilievo. Yes, to-morrow. You used to like me and mine. Do not deny it! And we are all unchanged. Aniouta will do her best for you. Come to-morrow! We will discuss manures and free will. I know you love the place. Come! The Mujiks are just making the hay now. Our Mujik is an ideal creature! What do foreigners know of our country? Nothing. Oh, for one breath of Russian hay! And we will make them dance and sing. You used to like that. Ivan Ivanovitch, come and make us happy! We love your cheery face.”

‘I gave a conditional promise. We agreed to discuss the matter more fully next day. Meanwhile my friend drank a bottle or two while I told him all my news. He struck me as being restless and exalted in manner—in fact, a kind of distortion of his old self. He was usually rather calm. I

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imagined he had been dining generously—in contrast to his habitual custom. There was something, I know not what, in his behaviour to me that evening that gave me an unpleasant impression of him. Indeed, his whole personality almost repelled me—a feeling that I was thoroughly ashamed of at the time. I experienced an uncomfortable sensation, difficult to describe and impossible to dispel; a sensation as though I were conversing (how shall I express myself?) with a nightmare clothed in flesh and blood, rather than with a man. He had changed wonderfully, I thought, in those few years. He went on:—

“I detest these countries full of hills and dales. One cannot see in front of one’s nose. We Russians do not like to be shut in—we have broad minds that cannot bear to be arrested by trivialities. You find me more patriotic than formerly? I daresay. Our nation is a family of brothers; our hearts throb with one pulse. Match me that in the world! I think I am inclined for a little music now. Let us listen to some tsiganes. . . . What, no tsiganes in London? . . . Then how do you spend your evenings?” . . .

‘He discoursed for some time in this exaggerated strain, talking so loudly that Sumner, a day or two afterwards, asked me who the

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eccentric foreigner had been. At last he left me, giving me an address at one of the principal hotels. I gave him mine and walked home. . . .'

The speaker paused, as if undecided how to continue his narrative.

His friend said:—

'That was certainly a strange meeting. Did you see him again?'

'Him? *Whom?*'

'Why, Ponomareff, of course.'

'Ponomareff? I never saw him at all. What I saw and spoke to, was something else.'

'Good Heavens!'

'I met my friend, the real Ponomareff, last winter in Petersburg. He was quite different from the thing—the meaningless and unlovely caricature—that I had seen. Needless to say, he was utterly dumbfounded at the story.'

'Good Heavens!'

'He is not grey-haired, and not married to this day. And at the time of our presumable meeting he was shooting with his brother in the Caucasus. Can you explain that?'

The other thought a while and then remarked:—

'I cannot explain it at all. It is a mystery.'

# Elfwater

## I

FAR away, among desolate peaks, in that voiceless wilderness of stone and ice where the clouds linger, a horde of rivulets, bursting from patches of eternal snow, joined their waters and sped away. And the stream leapt downwards through groves of bearded fir, or glided in a smiling flood over smooth meads of foxglove and tiger-lily and marigolds, caressing their roots with its eddies.

To the country folk who lived in the valley below it was a living and a spiteful thing. They called it Elfwater. Its waves were dull, bluish, insipid to the taste, and fraught with unhealthy chills from the snows above ; none cared to drink of them ; and its shores were encrusted with fanciful stone shapes of grass and moss, elves' work, like the ice crystals on the window panes in December. And none cared to build houses near the water or to own the fields on either side. For sometimes, in the bluest days of midsummer, the stream

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suddenly swelled to a furious torrent and overleapt its flowery banks, drowning the lush meadows far and near. 'The elves,' the old folks would then whisper, shaking their heads. They knew its elvish and wayward tricks, and some of them, maybe, still believed in such creatures. And the young men would come out to view the mischief, and gaze into the sunny sky and up at the hills, and talk together and look wise, secretly wondering.

Only one man could foretell the floods. He had lived on the Elfwater all his life. But he is dead long ago; his cottage is deserted; the roof has fallen in, the wooden beams are decayed and green moss sprouts between the planks of his floor. He used to look up at the hills and see a small vapoury cloud anchored against one snowy peak, and say nothing. Whenever they asked him to explain, he merely smiled, as if the Elfwater kept no secrets from him.

Meanwhile, the fair meadows were flooded and the crops buried till only a few bright green tips showed above the seething foam. And up in the forest, where all should be still, the shriek of the torrent could be heard from afar. It thundered among the ravines and roared for freedom in its narrow prison, churning the boulders with hideous din and tumbling the tall pines, whose painted

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boles, loosened at the root, shivered and rocked like the limbs of some convulsed giant. The pale wood-flowers nodded helplessly in the tawny spray. It was unearthly in its rage.

And then, with as little show of reason, its elfin wrath melted to a smile and it shrunk back into a silvery thread of water, hushed and clear. It was ashamed of its freak, and weary.

But the harm was done, and only this one man's meadows were spared, for they lay out of reach of the wildest floods. They were remote from the valley by a many hours' climb—damp, sloping meads, fringed by dark firs, on the shady side of the stream that rushed in a deep strid below the cottage. The folks called them 'elf-meadows,' perhaps because, in times of flood, two or three tall columns of spray could be seen rising up from the gulf below and bearing some fancied resemblance to white elves or fairies.

The man had often watched these misty pillars swaying gracefully. He loved the Elfwater; he had learned to identify himself with all its moods. The ripple of its grey wavelets was the voice of an old friend, a friend of his boyhood—the sound that met his ears in the earliest morning and that charmed him to sleep at night; and he often thought of the days when, as a child, he used to hang over the dim forest pools and watch the

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bubbles and hearken to rare music streaming upwards from the depths. It was the pebbles dancing in the current; but, to his childish ears, it sounded like the faint songs of the water-fairies, disporting themselves on the crystal floor.

And if by chance he dropped anything into the stream the elves were sure to bring it to the surface again. Everyone, indeed, was agreed upon that point. Scythes and axes and sickles that had fallen into the deep pools were always churned up again and found lying on the banks, 'sharper than before,' the folks said. And once a heavy cart, loaded with hay, was overtaken by a sudden flood and borne away. Next day, wonderful to relate, they found it standing upright and unharmed on the bank. If there are no elves, who had done it? Even the man's old mother was sometimes amazed at these things, although she generally scoffed at the mountaineers' beliefs.

For she came from the green plains, far beyond the hills, where the folks are quite different. She laughed at the dull peasants and their ways. She was no dreamer! She knew about everything and believed in nothing. They feared her, but she feared none. She was calm and upright, and even-tempered, and prodigiously old—ninety years maybe, or even a hundred. But she was lithe and

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strong, and her back was straight as a lance. Her husband had died long ago. She had lived in that lonely cottage with her son all his life.

## II

'*WILL she live for ever?*' he often wondered. He hoped she would die, and that soon.

For they hated one another. And yet, strangely enough, both were just and honest, and even kind, according to their lights. And they lived together, both thinking that they were performing a duty towards each other.

In that low-ceilinged room, with its wooden wainscoting stained and blackened by age, they often sat and looked at one another for many hours without speaking a word.

'You are your father's child,' she would at last say, regretfully. She never reproached him with aught else, for he was a good son. And he never dreamed of vexing her, for she was his mother.

And then she would look at him again, and he would look back and say nothing.

What should he say? It was true enough; he was like his father in all things—short and heavy-



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ched, indifferent to cold and heat, with dark eyes, and crafty features that reflected in their harshness the crags and chasms of his home; slow to laugh, slow to speak, slow to decide, superstitious, gentle, but pitiless in resolve—a peculiar compound of strength and weakness. She would have wished to herself another son, tall, gay, ambitious, instead of this contented and crooked creature of the mountains.

And perhaps she thought of her own home in the rich plains with their white-domed cities and laughing merchant folk. Did she regret having exchanged them for a hard life among the mountains? Doubtless. But she was never heard to complain of her lot, and, much as they disliked her, none could find an evil word to say of her. She had a sense of duty and an unbending will such as would have driven her, in other times and places, to seek a martyr's death rather than yield in her conviction. She had served her husband faithfully up to the day of his death, and, although she exacted blind obedience from the child, she never treated him with harshness. But from his earliest youth he had never understood his mother, and after his father's death he smiled seldom. He soon learned to close the channels of his heart, to retire within himself, wondering and dismayed, and leaving unspoken many thoughts.

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Even in the olden days it had been a strange love that they bore to one another. There was little charity in that house.

The old woman, accustomed to have her own way, treated him like a child long after he was grown to manhood, and such was his piety that he seldom dared to cross her wishes.

Her mind was stronger than his, but he was warmer of heart.

‘Why, then, do you not leave me and return to your own home?’ he would sometimes ask. He longed for her to take him at his word, but she never left him. She evidently thought this a passing whim on his part; indeed, what vexed him most of all, she seldom entered seriously into any of his ideas, regarding him rather as an idle visionary whose fancies must be humoured or—if mischievous—repressed.

‘Leave you? Leave you, my son? And why leave you? My folks are all dead. And what would befall you without me?’ She seemed to doubt whether the man of fifty could provide for himself! And yet she was not wholly insincere; there was something of pity mingled with her contempt—he was her son—her weak son, how else could he suggest such a thing?

‘You drove *her* away!’ he once dared to reply, trembling with rage. ‘If she were here there

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would be no need for you. Since that day I have suffered !’

He spoke of his life-long grief, and wondered at his own boldness in thus reproaching his mother.

‘These are foolish words, my son.’ She looked bravely into his eye. ‘Foolish words.’ But she feared inwardly, for he spoke the truth. The matter of the man’s wife was the only one she dreaded to discuss with him—the old woman knew that she had made a mistake. But it was against her nature ever to acknowledge a fault, and she therefore affected to ignore his grief. And, in truth, she could not easily bring herself to comprehend such an enduring affection. ‘Twenty years have passed since then,’ she mused. ‘Why does he not forget?’ No son of hers would think so long of one, and the same, woman.

In this one thing the man had thwarted his mother and brought home a bride who was not to her liking. But the victory had sapped his energy and he was too weak, or maybe too pious (a common enough story), to profit by it and bid the old woman begone. There followed a few short years during which the mother regained her power over her son and tormented in a thousand ways the young wife, who finally fled in despair, never to return.

The cottage remained the same, with its cool

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meadows and dark belt of forest, but the light of love was gone out and an undying hatred kindled.

That terrible morning when he found himself deserted ! The Elfwater was in flood, convulsed in its deep bed and howling in the hollow caverns that it had torn itself into the mountain's side. He climbed up to a certain little knoll—there, where the earth slopes away in a steep ledge above the thundering cataract and where he had often sat with her who was now departed. The current below this point was so fast that it might well have carried away the strongest man. Had she perished in the water? Surely not. It was his friend, it restored to him all that he ever lost.

He looked down the stream. There was sunshine and peace in the valley below, but here all was grey desolation and loneliness ; the torn clouds stuck among the pines. And ever and anon a ghostlike pillar of spray rose up from the noisy depths and drenched the meadows with its dew. Sometimes one remained upright, swaying in the wind like a shrouded human form. 'She cannot be dead,' he thought. 'She will return.'

In the course of time disquieting rumours of her, the absent one, had reached the valley. The folks said that she well deserved all that she may have suffered, since she deserted a good husband for no

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cause. But the man cared nothing for evil reports. He knew the truth and how that it was all his mother's work. He thought of the picture as he had seen it, and each time he looked upon his mother's face—an hundred times daily—he was reminded of that other one who had suffered through her. But the old woman always knew the direction of his thoughts and stared back at him fearlessly, though without unkindness. She knew her power over him and exerted it freely, returning his look so steadfastly that he often felt the strength oozing out of his bones as after a long illness.

Often they sat thus in that dark room, confronting one another. They stared for long, long hours, striving for the mastery. And never a word was spoken. He longed for her to yield, to confess with her eyes, at least. But she never admitted any fault, and there was nothing to be read out of her eyes. They were pale blue, cold and lively as the ripples of a mountain river, and fringed with bristly white lashes. Her long curls drooped over them, for her oval forehead was overhung down to the nose with thick locks, white as driven snow, and stiff hairs curled over her lips and out of her nostrils. She had a strange, deep voice, gruff as a cracked bell, and a complexion clearer than a child's. Under its transparent skin could be seen the veins wandering about like little

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red rivers. And even in her old age she was taller than her son.

Likely enough she had been comely in her youth, but now she was grown monstrous.

She used to say, 'Look you, what could you do without me? I must care for you like a little child. Do not I work for you, make your food and clothing?'

It was true enough, like everything that she said. He had grown idle and listless in latter years. But he thought, 'How different it might have been! How happy I was, and how little would have contented me!' Then he would sigh to himself, grief-laden, and the customary look of reproach, which she was awaiting, did not come. For he left the room silently with bowed head.

And as often as he returned he found her sitting upright on her bench beside the stove, with her long fingers working at her wool, ever ready to take up the mute challenge. To the man, thus peering into her glassy eyes, they seemed to swell till they dominated his whole being. He clenched his fists and looked away.

Sometimes, after such a struggle, a strange feeling of rage and power entered into him. It made his whole body tremble. He thought it was an evil spirit tempting him. It used to whisper in his ear, but he could not understand the words.

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And, as the years went on, they spoke less with one another. Silence and hatred lay heavy upon that home. The man's black curly hair was already streaked with grey. As for the woman, she grew old—old, but she never changed.

### III

'*WILL she live for ever?*' he wondered.

'Ay, we are a long-lived race,' she said aloud. For even when he was yet a child she always guessed his thoughts as correctly as if he had spoken them aloud. 'I am old—I have lost count of the time—but I shall live yet many years and work for you. Be thankful. We are a strong race—our blood is good—we live long—'

'Too long,' he thought, and would have said it aloud but the impious words stuck in his throat and choked him. The old woman, meanwhile, fixed her eyes upon him, knowing his thoughts.

'Surely,' she said, trying to sweeten the gruff tones of her voice into persuasive pleading, 'surely you would not drive your mother out in her old age to die by the roadside?'

'Surely not,' he replied, moved by a return of his natural piety. *But how different it might have been!*

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As he stepped out of the doorway he found, lying upon the threshold, a log of wood with some blood stains upon it, and a bunch of gaudy feathers. He recognised the feathers. They were those of a jay—doubtless the old familiar bird that visited the cottage at times. His mother must have killed it, after waiting for her opportunity all these many years. She hated it on account of its history, for it was the young woman, the absent one, who had caught and tamed it during her short life at the Elfmeadow.

The man, although generally callous to the sufferings of the wild things of Nature, was strangely affected, in his present exasperation, by the sight of these poor remains. His mother had chosen an evil moment. He carried in the feathers and held them before her eyes.

‘Look!’

‘I see.’

‘Why have you killed it?’

‘Because it was thievish. And because I disliked it,’ she added truthfully. She was never so sure of her ascendancy over him.

But he was enraged at the hard words. He thought of the absent one—it was as if a link between himself and her had been cruelly severed. He said fiercely:—

‘You killed it! Even as you killed *her*! . . . This cannot endure!’



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‘All this is foolish talk. Will you never be reasonable?’

‘Even as you killed *her*!’ he repeated hoarsely. There was a tingling in his ears and the veins in his forehead suddenly swelled.

Then the Evil Spirit came (it had come often of late) and spoke to him. He understood what it said. It said ‘*Now*.’

‘You killed her! . . . This cannot endure. One of us two shall die. . . . Even as you killed her! Ah! Do you understand? Do you confess? You killed her! Ah! . . . and I will kill you!’ And, for the first time in his life, he seized her in a grip of steel and shook her till the white curls danced over her face. A rain of fiery sparks was falling before his eyes, and he shook on, regardless of her shrieks. How light she was! She reeled under his arm, and he would assuredly have shaken the last breath out of her old body but that something in the touch of her cold, dry skin brought him abruptly to his senses again.

‘Let me go!’ she growled, as boldly as she could, gasping with rage and breathlessness. ‘Would you raise your hand against your mother? You are no man.’

But he was inwardly glad, for the spell, he thought, was broken. He used to fear her, but now he had seen her weakness. ‘She is only a

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woman—only a weak woman.' Nevertheless, his energy soon melted away, and, like after his marriage, he lacked courage to bid her begone. He had felt his strength, but he feared to use it.

And the woman had felt her weakness, but she sought to hide it. She would show no signs of defeat. Yet, whenever she spoke to him, she was sensible of a strange twitching in her jaw and a new tone in her voice, the sound of fear, which she tried to conceal, but could not. Therefore she wisely ceased to speak altogether, and the man likewise preferred silence, since he foresaw that he could no longer reckon upon his self-control in the event of a dispute. Thus, neither trusting themselves to speak to the other, many days, and many months, would pass without a word being said, although they looked at one another from time to time in a way that left little to be misinterpreted.

In his dumb contests with those relentless eyes the man was worsted. The old woman, without a word, gradually cowed him into submission and re-established her empire. And the man now only clung with luxurious self-torture to the bitter-sweet remembrance of other days. The absent one, at that distance of time, had become invested with a sacred and well-nigh supernatural character. He would not believe in her death. 'She will return to me.' His superstitious mind would have

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deemed it little of a miracle to have encountered her, in saintly guise, during his wanderings in the forest or on the banks of the stream where they had often lingered together. She was no longer a human creature, but a shadowy being crowned with an halo of immortality.

As for the old woman, she lived on for many years.

*'Will she live for ever?'*

Ay, she was clearly fated to live for ever, and he no longer cherished any hope. He would repeat: 'This cannot endure. One of us two must die!' But it endured. 'You are no man!' It was true enough, like everything that she said. You are no man! He laughed at his own weakness—a bitter laugh. Would he kill her? He shuddered at the idea. Besides, he dared not.

Once, indeed, after an unhappy day and many hours of sleepless torments, the Evil Spirit came again and spoke to him in the same manner as before.

And he crept up to where she slept, hardly knowing what he was about to do. It was midnight. She lay with folded palms, half-reclining, in her accustomed attitude, on the bench beside the stove. She breathed softly.

But her eyes were not shut! They were open

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and glowed like lamps in the dark. The man stepped back awe-stricken.

'I see you,' she said calmly, without moving so much as a finger—hated words, that haunted him ever afterwards.

She was satisfied with her triumph and said nothing, but the man's last spark of courage was crushed out of him. Thenceforth he walked with downcast head and averted look. Never again would he raise his hand, or even his voice, against her.

At times, to escape from his care, he descended into the valley and drank fiercely.

But, more often, he wandered through the lonely forests, loudly praying for forgiveness, for guidance, and for release from those awful eyes that, vampire-like, sucked out the strength of his body. His soul was humbled to the dust. The trees, the rocks and the wild waters were witnesses of his heartfelt supplications.

He prayed thus for many years.

And, in the end, his prayer was heard.

## I V

FOR the old woman grew blind. The blue fire faded out of her eyes. They became milky, as

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it were two white opals, though the flame still burned dimly within. For a long time she hid it from her son, but he found out in the end and thanked the Great Being who had heard his prayer.

‘You wax blind, mother. Your eyes are filmy.’

‘Nay, you mistake. I see well,’ she answered, looking boldly towards him, for she knew that he was watching her steadfastly.

She struggled on with an iron will. Whenever his glance fell upon her she must have felt it, for she at once stared back into his face, and so steadily that he often wondered whether he was indeed not mistaken. But her task became harder every day. And she began to fear mightily, for although her old body was healthy and tough as an oak she foresaw that, with the darkening of her sight, her power over him would wane.

‘The film grows upon you, mother.’

‘I think not. I see my wool,’ she croaked back.

But slowly the crystal of her eye clouded to dull horn.

Again he insisted, ‘You see me less plainly than before,’ strangling, as best he could, the joy that quivered in his voice.

‘I see you well enough.’

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But she saw him not at all! She was stone blind. And when she spoke with her son there resounded a horrible note of triumph and menace in his voice. She thought, 'He will kill me if he discovers the truth,' for thus she interpreted his crooked peasant-nature. Yet she still contrived to hide her fear, even as he hid his joy; casting about, meanwhile, for some new device to overawe him. At last she hit upon a cunning and bold deceit, worthy of her fearless mind.

'I am not blind! I see you—I see every hair on your head! And I look into your eyes—I pierce them through. . . .' He turned aside from her fixed stare.

'Is it possible?' he wondered.

'I see! This film, of which you speak, is in your own eyes! I can see into your very heart, and read your evil thoughts and wishes. Are you not ashamed?'

Such words she often repeated, and each time the man heard them it was as though a lash had struck him. And he looked at her, endeavouring to read the truth out of her calm face, and his superstitious mind grew afraid.

'I see you!' she repeated, and she dissembled so well that he began to believe. His blood curdled with fear.

Was it possible . . . ?

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He took to prowling stealthily as a lynx, hoping to avoid her glance and, by taking her unawares, to satisfy himself of her blindness. But she was too quick for him—her pearly eyes always discovered his whereabouts and her words sunk into his heart.

‘I see you! I see everything!’ she growled, with well-simulated joy. § She had duped him!

But a nameless dread fell upon the man. He went out of the door and passed through the forest and never returned for many weeks.

## V

ONE sunless morning in the early spring he staggered home from the village. His gait was unsteady, but there sat a steady purpose in his heart. The old woman lay in her accustomed attitude on the broad bench beside the stove. She never moved: she slept. She slept much in these latter days. The man crept nearer, craving to look into her face.

She slept on, and her sharp ears never heard his approach, for the Elfwater was in flood, writhing and screeching in its narrow channel till the cottage trembled with the fury of the water. As he bent down to look at her the door was

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burst open by a sudden gust of wind. But she slept on.

He turned back to shut it, and, as he did so, he looked out upon the landscape. There was sunshine and peace in the valley below, but here all was grey desolation and loneliness; the torn clouds stuck among the pines. And ever and anon a ghostlike pillar of spray rose up from the noisy depths and drenched the meadows with its dew.

It was on such a morning, he remembered. . . . How long he had waited! Surely she, the absent one, would come soon. . . .

And he returned to look down upon the old woman, the cause of all. She slept on.

Then the Evil Spirit drew near and spoke to him. It said, '*Now.*'

And already his teeth were set to the work. But at that moment she awoke of her own accord and opened her eyes. They were like discs of polished lead. And when she had done so, and never so much as took notice of him, he knew the truth. She was blind—blind as a stone! He stepped back a pace, breathing heavily with the weight of unexpected joy.

And then an immense wave of love and compassion swept over him, submerging every other thought or feeling. He pitied her misfortune and would fain have forgiven her all. He would love



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her doubly. He would humble himself in ministering to all the wants of her old age.

But the woman soon felt the human presence and, in mingled fear and defiance, shrieked aloud, little dreaming what effect the words would have:—

‘I see you! I see everything!’

Hated words, that turned his love to very madness. For immediately it was as if a crimson flame leaped up before him, burning away the remembrance of all that is or had been. And he held her gently and said (his words sounded like a lesson learned beforehand):—

‘Enough. Come.’

‘Begone, fool! Will you raise your hand against your mother? Leave me!’ But he only drew her nearer to him.

Then the truth flashed upon her, and her voice broke from its troubled depths to a scream that drowned the howl of the wild waters.

‘Out upon you, monster! You wish to kill me, but I wish to live! . . . Are you not satisfied with my blindness?’

She thought by this confession to appease his wrath. But it was too late and her words were lost.

Perhaps he would have obeyed if he had heard, for his piety was fervent. But he saw and heard nothing. There was a din in his ears as of crash-

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ing thunders, and a mighty curtain of blood swayed heavily to and fro before his eyes. He merely uttered that one word 'Come.' It sounded dreamlike and distant, as though another man, not himself, were speaking. . . .

The woman, undeceived as to his intent, struck out bravely with her arms, fighting like a mountain cat; but he gathered energy from her resistance and picked her up as he would a child (for, though tall, she was thin and light), and carried her out of the cottage and across the damp meadow. Her white locks were driven by the wind about his face. The Elfwater shouted for gladness. . . .

He returned alone and sat still a while, pondering painfully. It cost an effort to collect his thoughts, for he was still drunken and dazed with the shock of the last hour. Slowly, reluctantly, one by one, the memories crept back, building themselves up into the hideous fabric of his crime.

'Ah!' he remembered it all. But a pallid fear shook him. What if she had not died? And if the Elfwater yielded her up again, even as it yielded up all else? God! If she were still alive. . . . She was strong and active. . . .

His teeth chattered and his eyes remained fixed upon the half-open door, for he dreaded every minute to see her return with dripping garments to the accustomed seat, and then, turning, to confront

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him with that leaden stare. But, as she never returned, he finally crept across the meadows to the water's edge, peering into the misty depths below. Then he looked down the stream. There was nothing in sight. Puffs of wet breath came up at times from the torrent and cooled his heated head.

And then, suddenly, he saw, or thought he saw, a pale grey shape moving in the water far away. Soon it reached the shore and disengaged itself from among the boulders. It stood upright. How tall it was! Its garments were long and clinging, and it climbed slowly towards him, stumbling often among the stones. Slowly it wound itself aloft. It seemed to be weak, for it paused at times to gather strength, or to bethink itself. Was it a spectre? Surely not. Surely it was his mother, escaped alive from the whirlpools of the Elfwater.

The man raised his hand to his head, where the moist perspiration had gathered. He was unnerved with fear. But the shape had reached the narrow path, and, after resting awhile, suddenly stretched out its arms, as though feeling the way, and seemed to drift straight towards him at a rapid pace. It had evidently made up its mind. It came nearer.

He waited no longer. He was seized with a

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blind, unreasoning panic and fled upwards, past the cottage, into the deepest shades of the dripping forest, and never so much as stopped to look behind him, for he felt that it was pressing upon his heels.

And there, sheltered under a huge fir, he remained many hours, terror-stricken. Evening closed in upon him. But at last he reasoned away his fear and turned his steps homewards in a quieter frame of mind. And yet he could not rid himself of the notion that the horror was somewhere near at hand, lurking in the darkling shades. He would gladly have shouted to reassure himself, but he dreaded lest the sound of his voice might start it up before his very face. And as he silently walked on, his alarms grew apace. Like a startled child he dared not turn his head, but walked faster and faster through the dark trees till, on the meadows, his pace increased to a run—a horrible, breathless race. He entered his home and looked around him, fearful of some unspeakable calamity.

The shape had arrived before him. It sat, upright and stern, on the accustomed bench, and its eyes—those awful eyes—stared at him with fixed determination across the darkened room. They seemed to say:—

‘One of us two shall die.’ . . .

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He felt his hair raise itself under his thick fur cap. He would have fled, but his feet refused to move and there began a strange throbbing in his head. He was constrained to stand still and gaze.

Ay! It was his own corporeal mother! Her clothes were dripping and a little pool of water had collected on the floor. She remained immovable as a rock, save for an occasional spasm of shivering. She had apparently not yet heard him. There was a line of human suffering about the mouth, as of one who would weep, but cannot. And the man saw a small stream of blood oozing from a wound on her head; it trickled slowly and stained her white locks with crimson drops. At that sight there fled across his disordered mind a shadow, a fleeting mockery, of the former feeling of love and contrition.

But the old woman made a slight movement. She must have become aware of the human presence.

And she deliberately opened her mouth to speak, no doubt, the hated words. Her spirit was unbroken.

Then the man, by a last effort of will, tottered forth, vanquished. His temples ached fiercely; bereft of reason, he strayed into the grey

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twilight to the water's edge. And lo! not far away from a certain little knoll—there, where the earth slopes away in a steep ledge above the thundering cataract—another frail white shape floated lovingly towards him. It came nearer delicately, and enveloped him in its dewy shroud.

At last!

The spray fell in showers upon his burning head, but his arms sought the yielding form and he fell prone into the void, meeting its chill caresses with a responsive kiss.

## The Sentence

MIDNIGHT. The king sat on his throne of judgment in the high-vaulted chamber and all the captains of the army, the counsellors and judges of the land, were gathered about him. Immense torches lit up the ruddy faces of the body-guard and played upon their burnished armour, that threw back confused gleams. Their lances cast long, flickering shadows upon the walls. The recesses of the spacious hall were lost in darkness.

Then, far away in the gloom, there resounded a clank of chains upon the stone floor. It came nearer, and presently they led up before the throne a certain young man of proud and defiant mien, heavily manacled. The nobles looked up to the king to read his purpose, for he was about to judge a high-born prince whose condemnation could be pronounced by none save himself. Some of them hoped that, by reason of his former love to the prisoner, he would forgive the offence. Others, for that

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same reason, feared it. But in the king's countenance lay neither tenderness nor fierceness, but a great calm. He put his hand to the hilt of the blade that lay across his knee, and all the bystanders knew that he was about to speak. They stood ranged round him, and held their breath, immovable as the figures in a picture. Only the shadows flitted to and fro upon the painted wall, and the weapons glittered restlessly.

Casting his eye upon the young man he said :—

‘My ear is never deaf to complaints, but you have chosen another course and have sought to redress private grievances by a public calamity. In raising your hand this day against the Kingly Majesty you have injured my people and these your equals. No pretext will serve to lessen your crime. The other men, the partners of your treason, will be judged in their place according to the law of the land. Know that the doom of death is prescribed for all who threaten the integrity of the realm in the person of its Sovereign.’

He paused awhile, and some of those that loved the criminal thought to see the king's brow clouded for a moment with pain. Then he added: ‘And from this doom your former



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services to the Crown cannot save you, nor your rank, nor your youth. Prepare, therefore, for death.'

He ceased, but all around stood hushed in deepest silence for many minutes, as though he yet spake.

Then they led him away.

## Nerinda

DURING the winter months of 1897-1898 Lady Bertha S—— studied the *Times*, as well as her own local Scottish paper, with more than usual assiduity.

It was not that she took a particular interest in the discussions of the House of Commons — indeed, since her husband's death, two years ago, she took little interest in anything connected with politics — but she was anxious concerning the fate of her only brother, who was engaged at that time in fighting the Afridis on the Afghan frontier.

Captain Donald C—— was his sister's junior by a few years. They had spent all the years of their childhood and youth together, and she learned to look up to him as the ideal of all that is honourable and true. Often, in her girlish fancies, she had compared him with those knights of old; he was so chivalrous—quixotic even — so devoid of all egoism and

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brutality. And a man of intelligence, too; a man of culture and heart, a lover of refinement, a scholar. His unwearied studies, indeed, had told severely upon his health on more than one occasion.

She often wondered what strange freak had led him to join a profession that accorded so ill with his tastes and habits. She longed for the close of the war. Every morning, as she read the paper, she dreaded lest she should find his name amongst the list of the fallen.

And even so it fell out.

Her eyes encountered, one February morning, a cold-worded telegram announcing his death. He had apparently perished in one of the numerous rearguard actions, the disgrace of the campaign, when the enemy aimed securely in the twilight from behind rocks at the retreating British troops that ought to have been in camp two hours ago.

Lady Bertha was calm by nature and had been trained in the hard school of suffering. And yet—what a blow!

And in due course a melancholy parcel of papers arrived. Captain C—— was one of those singular beings who, from sheer laziness, or from some dark religious motives, can hardly

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bring themselves to destroy anything they have ever written or received in writing. Under such circumstances it is not surprising that the parcel should contain an enormous amount of correspondence and papers of all kinds. Nor did it astonish Lady Bertha that she should have been selected by her brother as the one person fit to be entrusted with the task of sifting all this mass in the event of his death, knowing, as she did, that he was passionately attached to her and possessed implicit confidence in her judgment.

For a day or two she left them untouched. Then, one cloudy afternoon, she opened the parcel with a feeling of dutiful reverence, and immediately there dropped out of it, by one of those curious chances (call them what you will) that guide our destinies, a certain old packet of papers—a fragmentary kind of diary as it proved, a diary of a foreign tour that Captain C—— had been obliged to undertake, for the benefit of his health, with his sister Bertha several years before her marriage.

‘Ah!’ she exclaimed involuntarily, as her glance alighted upon it. But, as she continued to read, her brow contracted and her pure features assumed a new and pained expression.

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. . . . .

*Capri, March 20.*—It was a Homeric day. The atmosphere trembled with love and light. How happy I would be if I could divest myself of that feeling of loneliness. . . .

*Capri, March 21.*—We spent the afternoon on the summit of our favourite hill, a magic spot where the spirits of sky and ocean still deign to hold communion with a favoured few. The view at our feet is assuredly one of the most impressive in creation—an ancient world lies spread out in rare beauty of colour and outline, and every inch of its ground is fraught with associations.

Here, surely, on the gentle shores of the Mediterranean, true beauty resides with its harmony of form and colour. The works of man in these regions stand out in just proportion to those of Nature; each supplements the other. Elsewhere she is apt to be hostile to him; she becomes either gloomy or monstrous. At the Pole mankind struggles with the elements and grows into a hero—the light fails, vegetation refuses her aid, he invokes the pale sun as a beneficent goddess; in the Tropics his works shrink into insignificance, he is crushed by the

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vegetation, devoured by the sun, whom he execrates as a fierce demon. Nature triumphs and man dwindles into a stoic.

Here, surely, on the gentle shores of the Mediterranean one might be happy!

*Capri, March 23.*—Bertha does her utmost to cheer me up. May she have her reward! The soul of goodness dwells in her. But . . .

Shall I be always alone?

An inward voice says, 'No.'

*Capri, March 24.*—Far away, in the blue distance across the incomparable gulf, a promontory lies, faintly shining. It is where Lucullus, the temperate warrior, retired to meditate. And where is now his civilisation? Nothing but ruins.

Doubtless he similarly thought upon the remains of old Hellenic culture that met his eye in every direction and wondered when the time would come for his own to decay and perish. For he was not a man to cherish illusions on that score. It is only we who imagine that our state of things will last for ever, because we do not give ourselves the necessary leisure to reflect.

That time has now come, and what would be his impressions on revisiting these scenes? Would he bow the knee to our ideal of beauty?

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Would he be eager to adopt our mode of life, our gods, our aspirations? I doubt it.

And Tiberius, the dragon of Capri, whose breath still infects the island? Surely he cherished as few illusions as the other, for his was a yet more plastic mind. Though ruler of the earth, he was not blinded by his splendour; the arch deceiver remained undeceived. He could read the signs of the times; he knew that his world was even then crumbling to ashes.

Tiberius was an essentially modern type. No wonder that a man of his temper and capacities should have been misunderstood and misinterpreted in an age of ignorant bigotry. He was modern even in his failings; he suffered, in his old age, from a vice—an inhuman lust of cruelty—that some of us moderns can understand and would even imitate but for the fear of a law that had no terrors for Tiberius. Nowadays we would call him a *neuropathe*. There is a stage when nothing short of the spectacle of tortures and rivers of red blood will prick the jaded appetite. I think I can understand a certain pleasurable emotion arising out of the sight. . . .

While we lingered, darkness came on with mysterious rapidity. The sun had set, but the sky, at first, still glowed with opalescent streaks of light that shone like flashing meteors strayed

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from their path. Suddenly they vanished and there was a great stillness. The landscape at our feet floated in an ocean of liquid pearl. Then a purple veil fell over all things. The evening star glittered overhead.

*Capri, March 25.*—This is what I wrote out for Bertha—a kind of day-dream, for I still doze a good deal in the afternoons:—

‘When the whole island was covered with luxurious plantations and cool, marble-paved courts, Tiberius, the man-demon, could be seen slowly pacing its terraces, or borne, in cunningly-wrought litter, from one to the other of his pleasure-houses. . . .

‘He has arrested the bearers at a favourite spot and has stepped out in order to breathe the fresh sea air. He looks about him. An Argosy from Egypt comes wafted through the straits laden with corn for Puteoli, and other merchandise. The remotest valleys of the East have been ransacked to produce perfumes and oils for the curled locks of Roman beauties, and many a laughter-provoking Milesian fable is breathed westwards on the lips of the Greek sailors.

‘It has entered the bay and an angry line contracts the old man’s brow.

‘“When,” thinks he, “shall I set my foot once



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more upon Italian soil?" The attendants are dismissed with a petulant gesture and he walks towards the sunlit theatre leaning on the arm of a slave and regretting the lost vigour of youth.

'Once seated in his ivory chair an irresistible drowsiness overcomes him. Sleepless nights have been his portion for many months; a silken couch has no attractions for one who dreads death at every hour and in every shape. He loathes his self-imposed solitude, and the animated theatre alone invites to repose. . . .

'The scene, with its Corinthian dancing-girls, its pillars of Phrygian marble, its background of leafy garden and blue sea, is fast fading before his eyes. . . . The soft tones of the flutes sound strangely distant. . . .

'Tiberius reigns in another world. The imperial purple trails on the ground, and those restless lids are now half closed. A bunch of fragrant daffodils—the morning's offering of fair Theano—is tightly clutched in his withered hand; a sardonic smile hovers about his mouth. . . .

'He is dreaming of Sejanus.'

I wrote no more, but the strangest part of the dream followed. For Tiberius spoke to me. He said plainly, '*It will come.*'

To what, to whom, did he refer?

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To myself?

So be it.

*Capri, March 27.*—Headache: the usual punishment for feeling too well. I am glad Raymond did not accompany us to this country. He is somewhat too boisterous and matter-of-fact.

*Capri, March 28.*—For ten months I have been forbidden to read books, or even newspapers—an intolerable restriction. That is why I have only to-day accidentally heard that the meteoric genius of Maupassant has sunk into the black night of madness; and just at the time when it gave promise of new and milder beauties. His works illustrate the difference between form and formalism. Alas! that fatal search after new sensations—the too-frequent concomitant of an artistic mind.

And Nietzsche smitten, only the other day, by the same fate.

The lightning, says Herodotus, strikes the tallest trees.

A curious coincidence. The German and French madman each conceived a being who should supersede mankind. Each of these conceptions is characteristic of its respective nation. The Teuton *Ueberschensch*, as philosophy, a nugget

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of gold: the Celtic *Horla*, as art, a priceless pearl.

*Capri, March 29.*—To-morrow we return to our old quarters at Sorrento.

Last night we hired a boat and paid a torch-light visit to our grotto. The effect of the illumination was fairylike. Quick and tall shadows trembled on the moist roof, as though troops of scared sea-ghosts were flitting dismally into the night. Here and there gleamed fiery eyes. A pungent smell of sea-wrack filled the vault, and the restless waves could be heard as they caressed the dripping walls far away in the recesses. It sounded like the heavy breathing of some monster of the deep.

A sailor sang us one of his Neapolitan songs. They are the pure expression of joy of life—a natural product of human life on this divine coast; even as Italian music in general, that soulless cult of rhythm, the child's love of repeating musical sounds over and over again, reflects the character of the nation as a whole.

Bertha said (I think she must have been quoting), 'Where words cease, music begins.'

I said, 'And where music ceases, kissing begins.'

While we listened there rose up from the sea

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another sound, that certainly spoke not of love of life—its weird tones could be construed into no clear expression of human sentiment. It only recalled a sense of hopeless yearning. It was one of those primeval chants of mankind, whose sphinx-like melodies still linger on this coast and defy the musician's art to record them. The long-drawn notes spoke of submission to a dark fate.

They sounded ominous to my ears.

*Capri, March 30.*—We have delayed a day.

Bertha asks me, *à propos de bottes*, what objection I have to the religion of these people. I told her that it offends me at every turn, that it is a permanent source of irritation to me on account of its ugliness and cruelty. That idea of eternal suffering. . . .

*Sorrento, Tuesday.*—This is evidently a feast day of some kind. These people, if you believe them, are always on the brink of starvation, yet they find time for two or three feast days every week. They are letting off the fireworks in broad daylight. They cannot wait till it is evening. Just like children.

*Sorrento, April 7.*—Day after day I sit under

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this ilex. Once more a calm begins to grow up around me. But it is a calm, a hush, that can be felt. I suppose they were right in saying that my nerves were overstrung; indeed, I can well believe it, for my intelligence seems to have become completely apathetic and numbed as regards certain things. In other matters I am hypersensitive. And one of them is precisely this *calm that can be felt*. I am overcome with loneliness, with the feeling of an unutterable solitude that surrounds me.

‘You are having a good rest; cheer up, old fellow,’ says Bertha. I nod and smile. Rest for the body, yes; but rest for the spirit?

It has become a nightmare, a positive oppression. It is not distrust of others, or disgust of life, but simply the result of dispassionate reasoning, thus: Whatever I do, I shall never be able to make myself completely understood by my friends. Friends! The very word is a mockery. They listen to what I say, they sympathise, they try to understand! And then I turn away and leave them, feeling that with my confidences I have given away the most precious part of myself. Then follows regret and self-humiliation. Surely, surely others have felt the same?

I feel that it is all in vain. That I am alone,

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that a gulf—yes, a gulf—yawns between me and all human creatures. Shall I explain once more to Bertha? No, it only pains her and affords me no relief. And if she cannot understand, who can? Let be. One way or another, something must happen soon.

*Sorrento, Saturday.*—Another glorious day. I am always up betimes. Are there any moments more divine than those of earliest morning, when something of the mystery of night, and of its moist caresses, still clings to Nature? Afterwards, this gossamer enchantment is rent asunder by the sounds and glaring light of day. The breeze has not sprung up yet and I can see the grey olive branches glittering steadily, as though carved in silver, against the sea's unruffled surface of pale turquoise.

The sea has an inexplicable attraction for me. Ever since I was a child I have longed to be a diver and to explore those mystery-peopled lands under the green roof of water. I never look at its glassy depths without feeling a yearning to plunge in. Who knows what lovely beings may inhabit the twilight caverns of the deep?

And then, those grey-pink tufa crags, and the white limestone with its tender mauve reflexes!

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How much could be enjoyed in this world if—  
if one were not always, hopelessly, alone!

I know that the severer beauty of Rome, the tender gleams of her golden light and the unspeakable melancholy of the Campagna, is more congenial to Bertha's nature. The beauty of Sorrento is too palpitating, vital and sensual. One longs to grasp it, to absorb it within oneself, to drain it as one drains a cup of wine.

Here I sit every morning and enjoy a spell of sunshine and brief repose. Repose; for my nights are still restless, and when I rise in the morning it is as if I came out of a battlefield. Reading is still forbidden, and Bertha is stern, although I am yearning to unpack my books.

Here I sit and try to construct within myself another and a better world. Why not? But that, I suppose, is why Raymond, whenever he wished to irritate me, used to say:—

‘You are not a real scholar, you know; you are only a vague, sentimental enthusiast.’

There is, I hope, some sentiment in my composition, but no sentimentality.

What can you expect from him?

These athletic people may be happy, but they always are not amiable.

My ilex and the olives in this garden alone

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preserve their primitive shapes. The olives, indeed, seem to enjoy a particular veneration, as in *Œdipus on Colonus*.

All the other plants are cropped, pruned, tortured and mutilated out of all semblance of their former shape. Why do the Italians love to mutilate everything? Their childlike, or rather childish, temperament derives pleasure, no doubt, from exercising its authority upon living things.

How have they become so degenerate in every respect?

Ages of oppression, misrule and slavery, I imagine, have crushed every better feeling out of them, brutalised their instincts, perverted their taste, vulgarised their whole conception of life.

Where are those pioneers of free thought who woke their slumbering country from her dream of monkish deceits—men who weighed the earth and counted the stars; who peered into worlds unknown, exploring a drop of water as it were an ocean; who enticed the electric spark out of the reluctant ore? Where is the spirit that animated them?

In the *municipio*.

Where are those artists and philosophers that once shed the light of beauty and wisdom over the whole world?

The artists of modern Italy are her statesmen,



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whose ingenuity in designing new taxes amounts to nothing short of genius.

And her philosophers are the starving peasants, who have to pay them.

The best energies and aspirations of a free country are consumed in narrow political strife. Italy is the *reductio ad absurdum* of Parliamentary Government.

A land of lawyers and assassins. . . .

Bertha always says I am unjust towards the Italians. She says I must try not to get fixed ideas into my head. Fixed ideas!

*Sorrento, April 10.*—It is positively incredible if I had not seen it with my own eyes.

In the entrance of this house are two rows of artificial paper flowers, resembling red camelias. This is bad taste anywhere, but especially in a land where so many lovely live plants can be obtained. I always hoped the porter would remove this eyesore.

Imagine, then, my surprise when I saw him this morning, can in hand, busily watering these pots. I went up and examined them closely. *The artificial flowers have been fixed, by means of wires, into the branches of a living plant.*

Shades of Raphael, Dante and Michelangelo! Such things can only be witnessed in *Italia liberata*.

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I fetched Bertha. She was equally horrified. She could hardly believe her eyes. And then she thought I took it too seriously and began to palliate their crimes ; but I told her that people who do such things are capable, also, of murdering their own fathers. She said that did not follow. In fact, I am afraid I got into a regular 'state' ; one of those 'states' that are so bad for me. The buzzing in my head began again. Then Bertha was frightened and began to agree with me, simply, as I could see, in order to humour me. After a while she said :—

'You must admit, Donald, that they have their good qualities, like all other nations.'

'Perhaps they have,' I replied calmly. 'I am always open to conviction. To what do you refer?'

'They understand the art of making mayonnaise sauce.'

Ha ! ha ! excellent ! This anti-climax had the desired effect. . . .

Afterwards I became more reasonable and thought a good deal about the Italians and their strong points. That is the worst feature of my temperament ; whenever an inquiry is started, my subordinate consciousness broods over it for days and weeks.

And I have discovered another good quality.

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They can build first-class roads—in fact, they know how to deal with rocks and rivers and to make them subservient to purposes of human intercourse. I suppose this is a legacy from the Romans. If they had only inherited a little more! The sense of justice, for instance. The vilest murders go unpunished in this country. . . .

Wherein lies the attraction which murders, and they alone, possess for the human imagination? Is it because, by their vast complexity, and the variety of their motives, they afford us some means of judging of the range of our own weaknesses and passions? That would be the intellectual attraction. And the emotional one is clearly this: that we feel a kind of relief in contemplating our distance from those depths of misery and depravity where man kills man, from hunger, envy or simple love of killing. Yes; this simple, innate love of killing is a not uncommon motive, nor without interest for the psychologist and student of morals, inasmuch as it accounts for the origin of many of our social institutions.

Also, besides all this, it would be strange if we did not feel a natural concern in the extinction of a human life, seeing that we must all go that way. That *something*, which was, what was it? Where

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is it now? How went it? And when that mystery is made to ooze out, painfully, forcibly, deliberately—the attraction naturally increases.

Bertha thinks murders quite inexcusable under all circumstances. And she added :—

‘They are not only horrible—but stupid.’ I could not help smiling.

*Sorrento, April 11.*—Headache again. What exquisite shade these olives yield—and yet not veritable shade, but a pearly atmosphere of fairyland. . . .

*Sorrento, April 12.*—My eyes never tire of admiring the sublime outlines of Vesuvius. And what a feast of colour during those minutes when the shades of sunset crawl up his inflamed flanks! Then the stupendous dome glows in roseate and amethystine lights, ever changing; it swells and heaves with life; the solid mountain dissolves in golden mist; it is transformed into a web of cloud. You can see through it! A rare illusion.

Leopardi's *Ginestra* is a sympathetic poem. But I can understand Bertha when she says that in reading Italian poets she cannot dismiss the notion that she is dealing with a race of buffoons. There is certainly a deal of mere intellectual gymnastics about their productions. As to the

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Divine Comedy—that monument of bigotry—much of its beauty is swallowed up by the detestable sentiments, sentiments that are enough to prejudice any feeling mind against the faith which it proclaims. I cannot bear the idea of eternal imprisonment. . . .

The poor prisoners, chained up and deprived of love and sunshine! What foul, outrageous cruelty is enacted between man and man. This is one of those subjects which, when I think of it, makes me shudder with impotent rage. Who can imagine their hopelessness, their sufferings, their solitude?

My own case, surrounded as I am by a wall of loneliness (indeed, every one of us has a citadel, his Individuality, into the inner recesses of which none can penetrate)—my own case makes me sympathise with their sad lot. Yes, this citadel! We pour out our whole heart to a chosen friend; he, or she, listens; then suddenly there rises up before our mind's eye a something which says:—

‘It is useless. Stop!’

Then you look, and behold—the gulf!

My private opinion is that Dr N—— suggested my coming to this gay and sunny climate because he imagined I was really suffering from some melancholy delusion about my solitude. That shows how little he knows my character. If I

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should ever suffer from any delusion at all, it would, I hope, have some more worthy and disinterested object than mere self.

*Sorrento, April 14.*—They talk of a visitation of the cholera. Bertha is not alarmed in the least—no more am I. We must all die at our appointed hour. These great waves of destruction have something weirdly fascinating. They show the absolute worthlessness of the individual before the tribunal of Nature. He sets up his own standards of just and unjust—what does she care?

‘A dreadful plague in London was  
In the year ’sixty-five,  
Which swept a hundred thousand souls  
Away—yet I alive!’

We have been keeping Pompei for the last—as a sort of *bonne bouche*, but we cannot restrain our curiosity any longer. To-morrow we shall drive there in the cool of the evening. Bertha is looking forward to it almost more than I am—she has a truly refined mind, and an unfeigned appreciation of what is beautiful.

Scirocco is blowing: Capri and Ischia are veiled in a cap of clouds. I feel unhappy and

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lonely again, but must try not to let her notice it.

*April 14. Night.*—I have committed a sin, and how angry Bertha would be if she knew it!

The fact is, when a temptation becomes too great, I simply yield. What is the good, I say, of wrestling with the inevitable? At the same time, I take full responsibility for all my actions. I do not lay the blame on others. When I do anything I do not profess to have been guided by any heavenly inspiration, in order to impress my actions with the stamp of righteousness. Read the life of any religious enthusiast, Church reformer or sectarian, and you will understand what I mean. 'It was told me, in a dream, to do this and that.' 'An angel appeared to me and said,' etc., etc. I would like immensely to have such dreams. So convenient, you know. They take away all responsibility. Of course, persons whose every action, even the most trivial detail of life, is ordained by Providence—such persons cannot go far wrong! That, I suppose, is what makes pious men so pious.

Well, then, I was seized with an irresistible longing to read something, to be again in touch

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with the minds of others. So I simply unpacked a book or two. I felt so lonely; I must read or die.

I have been subject to these cravings ever since my birth, and I always know beforehand whether I shall yield or resist. I generally yield.

‘Eat and drink!’ said Dr N——, ‘but don’t read. Reading is poison for you.’

Those who may read whatever they like can hardly appreciate my impatience at this long separation from my favourite occupation. For I am only allowed ‘a little writing; not more than half an hour a day.’ What it is to be an invalid!

So I unpacked a few books. I looked into Plato’s *Symposium* and compared the translations of Shelley, Jowett and Schleiermacher. They happened to lie together. It will probably cost me the whole night’s sleep.

As to Shelley, he is by far the weakest. His version, a transcription, lacks the completeness, the scholarship, and the Saxon virility of Jowett. The German comes, perhaps, first of all; his translation has a curious kinship with the original. Perhaps his language gives him an unfair advantage.

In what consists Plato’s peculiar charm? Why,



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simply in this: that, with the magic of his language, he makes me think I know more than I do. He exalts my opinion of myself. Is this a deliberate use of his genius? Hardly. Would it be a legitimate use? . . . Call him verbose if you like! Ruskin thinks Shelley 'empty and verbose!'

Yes, I can well believe that *each of us is continually looking for his other half*. And this desire of union is called *love*.

His other half. His other half! Where is mine? Shall we ever meet? Is she near at hand, or is she separated from me by leagues of sea and continent, by ages of time?

Why is there so much unhappiness in his world? Because, alas! not every one of us finds *his other half*.

This Attic fable seems to call an echo from the most secret caverns of my soul.

Bertha often wonders whether I shall ever find my 'ideal,' as she calls it. I tell her that if my 'ideal' were to appear now, it would be none too soon. I am lonely. That doctrine of elective affinity—what an ugly word for so lovely a truth!

*'And when one of them finds his other half, the pair are lost in an amazement of love and*

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*friendship and intimacy, and will not be out of one another's sight, as I may say, even for a moment.'*

*An amazement of love! Have I ever been lost in an amazement of love? No. But I feel that such things may be. Therefore they may be for me.*

*'The intense yearning which each of them has towards the other appears to be desire of something of which the soul has only a dark and doubtful presentiment. There are no words to describe it. But the soul divines that which it seeks and traces obscurely the footsteps of its obscure desire. . . .'*

The footsteps of its obscure desire. . . .

Weighty words, these.

*Pompei, April 15.*—The drive was delicious. It was an idyllic evening, cloudless and pure—the sun's heat tempered by a gentle *tramontana* breeze that carried coolness from the still snowy Apennines and waked, out of shady gardens, the fragrance of purple - clustered *Glycinia* blossoms.

The sublime and the vile touch hands in this country. Men lie sprawling in the gutters, and women, of forbidding aspect, shriek the morning's gossip to each other in hoarse tones

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across the street. Such voices! Continual bawling from the cradle to the grave has made them unlike anything else in the world. But poverty wears a smiling aspect. The children, though numerous, do not suggest the overbreeding and underfeeding of many parts of England.

Pompei is a revelation. We have only been a cursory visit of an hour or two. Bertha is enchanted with the town itself, whereas the human element of the place is what appeals most to my imagination.

The small museum with its well-preserved human remains is a weird spot. One could dream of it. There are wonderfully intact plaster-casts taken from the hollow mould formerly occupied by the actual bodies of those who perished in the catastrophe. The process is one of the discoveries of Mr Fiorelli, the principal archæologist.

There was one of a young woman, with eyes half closed as though in pain. It seemed to fascinate Bertha by its life-like grace and beauty.

‘Poor girl!’ she said at last, after standing entranced before it. ‘Chained up in that narrow case! Who can she have been? Perhaps the daughter of some patrician, hurrying away to escape the awful vengeance of her gods. It is

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revolting,' she added 'to expose even her ashes to the gaze of the whole world.' A truly womanly afterthought.

I said I thought she looked more like a nymph.

After returning through the temple of Apollo a curious fancy possessed me. I took Bertha with me along the dusty street as far as the modern church of Pompei. Heavens, what a cult has defaced this globe! What tinselly, tawdry, gloomy structures! What a grovelling herd of humanity! Assuredly, these preposterous Semitic conceptions, this outrage upon the good sense of mankind, can only have been imposed upon a world of free men in a moment of supreme weakness.

Like gipsies, they have stolen, and now claim as their own, the fair child of Plato, and they try to disguise him by disfiguring his features and bedaubing his skin to resemble their own tawny hide. . . .

And the superstition, such as it is, has already degenerated into mere form. Where are the cathedrals, the penances, the crusades of earlier days? We laugh at the infatuation of our ancestors. Our cult is a discarded husk, a gilded chrysalis lying on the wet ground, out of which Faith, the splendour-winged insect, has crept to seek a sunnier abode.

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Raymond seriously invokes 'the human soul.'

The soul! That unhappy word has been the refuge of empty minds ever since the world began.

Bertha and myself have just discussed a well-worn subject—that of marriage; but there is still a note of sadness in her voice. I know what it means: I know well enough what she has suffered ever since B——'s death in those vile barracks. That was four years ago. Will she never be comforted? But I respect her grief, and she is grateful for this—grateful and serene, a classical character, that looks upon Life and Death otherwise than the majority of this generation.

I explained to her the meaning of that passage from the *Symposium*. She said that she had always felt it and believed it to be even so. Then she said:—

'I can see that you have been reading. You know how wrong it is, and that the least reading may do you incalculable harm just now.'

I promised faithfully not to do so again.

In proportion as I grow old I learn to love her gentle nature. . . .

I have a presentiment that something will

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happen—a presentiment so persistent as almost to amount to bodily discomfort.

*Pompei, April 16.*—To-day's visit was more detailed, but my head is yet too full to call the impressions into their proper perspective.

My brain is clouded. . . .

There is one thing that cannot fail to strike all visitors to this town—namely, the lavishness of the Romans in regard to their public edifices, and the smallness of their private houses. They knew what was required for the expansion of intimate family life, for social intercourse as adapted to the climate, for the fostering of genial, kindly conversation—bright courtyards and small rooms. Ay, they knew, the old Romans; they and the Orientals alone have grasped the secret. These vast cheerless rooms of modern Italy, each with three or four doors, they disquiet the spirit; the softer emotions take flight and are dissipated in bleak, empty space. Ah, these Italian palazzi, interminable deserts of stuccoed ugliness—fit abodes for suicides; they are only another symptom of the disease from which the whole nation suffers—*megomania*. One wanders about them, oppressed with a sense of solitude. . . .

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Solitude!

*Apropos*, Bertha said a curious thing yesterday.

On our way home she wished to pay another visit to the museum, for it seems to have a great attraction for her. We also talked to the keeper, *Francesco* by name, an old man, with a kindly and intelligent face.

Bertha looked for a long time at her favourite plaster-cast.

'I am sure her eyes were violet,' she said at last.

'No,' I replied, 'they were blue.' What made me say that? I cannot think.

'You seem to be pretty well acquainted with her,' she laughed. 'Whatever colour they were, they must have been lovely.'

'She is altogether lovely,' I said. 'Truth mirrored in beauty.'

'Don't be sententious. And yet you are right—for it is strange to think that she is no artistic creation, but an actual human being like ourselves.'

'Precisely so.'

'I wish she could speak. I am sure I should love her, poor girl! And so would you. Perhaps you would want to marry her! Perhaps she is the ideal you have been seeking! She looks unhappy, and no doubt she had her griefs

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like—like all of us.' . . . And then she broke off sadly.

It is a remarkable fact that women often make sensible suggestions when they least intend to do so.

Why was I not born in those days?

Marriage! I thought again. Yes, but not according to the hideous and debasing ceremonial of our days. Mine should be a flowery rite of joy and love, an orgy of self-effacement, the very negation of human love.

For what is human love but the apotheosis of self, sordid and vile? And its means! And its end!

Such considerations have hitherto prevented, and, I fear, ever will prevent, my viewing the question of marriage in a serious light.

And still it is a subject, in its wider sense, upon which I could become enthusiastic and emotional. For I still take myself seriously. . . .

Indifference, lack of faith, lack of enthusiasm—these be the real mortal sins, these be the outward signs of a moral fatigue of the race, these be the cankers that undermine the body social and politic. A strong man should be capable of strong emotions.



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*Pompei, April 17.*—A reference to a few pages back shows me that the sentiments recorded in connection with the church of Pompei were harsh and intolerant, and possibly unjust. May Nemesis, that truly Hellenic personification, be ever before my mind's eye. And let me have the Roman's broad-minded tolerance towards such creeds as are repugnant to my own sense of beauty and justice.

Who could guess by what quaintly-winding thought-process this confession has found an outlet?

It is a wondrous voyage when one remounts the meanderings of that river Thought, that flows unceasingly, day and night, from birth to death. What dim, half-forgotten landscapes one traverses! 'Is this I,' one wonders, 'who thought and felt thus and thus only yesterday? Only five minutes ago? How I change!'

Well, I was dreaming, as I often do, about the sea; and then, waking up into a kind of half-sleep, there occurred to me that most characteristic of all Eastern tales—the tale of Abdullah the Merman and Abdullah the Landman. There is a most pertinent moral attached to it, worthy of the consideration of all thinking minds.

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Do you remember how the Merman plunges into the deep and, while the other is already blaming his thoughtlessness for allowing him to escape, returns to his astonished friend with each hand full of priceless gems, rubies and pearls, and jacinths and glowing emeralds. Glowing emeralds! How delicious! And that truly Oriental touch: 'Pardon me, my brother; I had no basket at hand, else I would have filled it for you.' And then their voyage together in the humid element. But here comes the defect of the story—it is here that the Oriental phantasy fails. And this is also that part of the tale that my own imagination loves to fill up!

And the end of this strange friendship?

A religious dispute.

One of them suddenly distrusts his friend's common honesty merely because he does not share his own particular opinion upon a matter of dogma.

To such an extent are we blinded—and such has been the fate of mankind ever since theology took morality under its wings.

Bertha says I am obstinate and intolerant. I reply, 'Perhaps. But the blame does not rest with me. Our faults, our virtues, are distilled for us beforehand in the silent laboratory of the past.'

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'A comfortable creed.'

'I have never wilfully hurt a living creature. That is the first law. I am a harmless lover of the spirit of beauty.'

'You will find her an elusive sprite.'

'That is what attracts me.'

'A mere idea?'

I reply, 'Precisely. The essence of true love is self-effacement. I have fallen in love with a mere idea. You women are too personal. You have no veneration except for tangible objects. That is why you are never really religious. An idea, pure and simple, never interests you; there must be a man standing behind it.'

*Pompei, April 18.*—With infinite trouble I persuaded Bertha to visit the ruins once more this morning. She would have liked to interpose a day and to go for a drive somewhere else. But I insisted and she came. The fact is, I am interested in certain things that will admit of little delay.

Francesco, the old keeper of the museum, who actually sleeps there every night as guardian of the relics, was standing at the door and nodded to us.

We looked at the girl again, but I can see that Bertha is growing tired of her.

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'That specimen,' said Francesco, edging up to us confidentially and observing our interest— 'that *signorina* is considered one of the finest and most successfully reproduced. It is if she could speak! *Molto ben riuscita, ma molto!* Professor Fiorelli himself admires her most of his whole collection. Look you, there was an artist, Signor Rapino, who made studies of the head for his great Maria Magdalena picture last year—well, he used to say that one could almost fall in love with her, like that young man mentioned somewhere in Lucian. Look at her pretty foot! . . . '

'How they do love to hear themselves talk, these Italians,' said Bertha.

'The poor signorina is now imprisoned in a narrow cell, ha ha !' (I could see that Francesco has no real sense of veneration, or he would not have spoken in that fashion. But lack of veneration is one of the chief characteristics of the Italian people, and a symptom of an exhausted race.) 'And yet, when she was alive, no doubt she loved to play with her friends, and to walk on the Corso, and to go to the Theatre, and to take pleasure like all of us. Observe her! It is as if she breathed with life. *Pare viva! Pare una cristiana. . . .*'

'Look, look!' I said suddenly to Bertha. For

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it really seemed as if a faint pink flush had, for a moment, suffused her ashy features.

Bertha saw it too. She said it was only the reflection from the red - brown panel of the door.

I envy Francesco living near so much beauty.

We had a discussion about it in the evening, and I pretended to believe that the girl was really alive, and that I was going to marry her. It was quite amusing to listen how Bertha argued with me—she has never learnt the true art of arguing.

‘Nonsense!’ was all she could find to say.

‘You may call it nonsense if you like,’ I calmly replied. ‘But I know what I know.’

This fortunate phrase, you observe, did not commit me to any opinion, and I kept on repeating it till she became quite angry.

‘You repeat these things till you end in believing them.’

‘I know what I know, my dear.’

‘Nonsense!’

‘Call it nonsense, then. But I know what I know.’

‘I do wish you would drive that stupid idea out of your head,’ she said at last.

‘Then you ought not to have put it there,’ I

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replied. 'It was yourself who proposed the marriage.'

I kept thinking about this all last night. . . .

*Pompei, April 20.*—My brain was too tired to write anything yesterday. I have been thinking the whole time.

We hardly referred to the museum discussion again. Somehow or other it has become a sore subject between us; or, at least, one to be avoided. I think I weary her with my remarks, and she tries to turn the current of my ideas to other matters. At last she declared outright that the girl was nothing but a heap of ashes, and that—

'No, not a *heap!*' I retorted, seizing the long-sought - for opportunity. 'Remember, *form tyrannises over matter.*'

'Yes,' she admitted.

'And *love triumphs over death,*' I added slowly.  
'Yes.'

And then she sighed. I could guess her thoughts. She was thinking of B——. But could she, or anyone else in this world, have guessed mine? . . .

I had carefully prepared the sequence of these two remarks, and I watched their effect upon her. They went home.

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I fear I am beginning to take a pleasure in annoying, or at least mystifying, her. I never knew that there was so much capacity for mischief in my constitution.

Bertha suggests that we should go back to Naples soon.

She says I am becoming irritable.

It is really wrong of me to vex Bertha after her untiring kindness and solicitude for me. Why must I do it? Whom have I in the world besides her? Who loves me as she does? Who? No one? Is there indeed no one? Or perhaps. . . .

*April 21, 3 a.m.*—I have just awoke from a divine dream. I was standing on a beach, all alone, and gazing sadly seawards, and then someone came and whispered, for a moment, in my ear—such truths! Things that I have never heard, and yet knew. How do you explain *that*?

And what were they?

I have forgotten!

And who was she?

Ah!

How shall words, mere words, convey any sense of the utter bliss of those short moments?

Imagine it if you can! . . .

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As for me—if death be like this, let me die. . . .

11 *a.m.*—This was an adventurous expedition. I crept in the grey of dawn, before sunrise and immediately after my dream, in the well-known direction. Bertha knows nothing—so much the better! This dusty, hot, unsheltered path, with its scanty grass at the sides, was invested, in that early light, with a dewy charm and redolent of a subtle fragrance exhaled by the rich volcanic soil.

I imagined myself some lover creeping to a secret meeting with his betrothed. That is a pleasant illusion and can harm no one. Altogether, considering how little harm I do, I am sometimes surprised at the number of those who secretly bear me ill-will. . . .

The door was locked ; Francesco was evidently still asleep. At last he heard my knocking and appeared in his *negligé*. How funny he looked ! Have you ever skinned an owl ? No ? I have. And that is what his appearance recalled to my mind. Your owl looks large and imposing in its ruffled feathers, but when you have relieved him of his skin he is transformed into a meek and diminutive pink deformity with huge eyes. And he looks so funny ! And Francesco, without his official uniform, seemed to have shrunk



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into a mannikin that one might crush in one's hand. Indeed, strange to say, I had a curious inclination to throttle him then and there, I know not why. Jealousy, perhaps.

He let me in, somewhat surprised at my early visit, and I wandered round the apartment with an air of proprietorship, as one who has entered his own house. It is so pleasant to have a house of one's own. . . .

'The signore can make himself quite at home,' he said, as he took my hat.

I should think so!

Then I gazed at her long and intently. But no! She gave no sign of life—not a sign, not a sign.

She seemed to slumber.

Is Bertha right after all?

I must try to have a good rest this afternoon.

*Pompei, April 22.*—The chivalrous adventure has been repeated, and I am taking a great fancy to these little excursions. But Francesco was surprised and seemed suspicious, so that I was obliged, at first, to wander round the room in a *nonchalant* manner, looking at all the other things and only glancing at her coyly, now and then, like a bashful lover, out of the corners of my eyes.

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I believe he thinks I came to steal something.

And so I did!

I came to steal a heart.

He asks if he can be of any use to the signore.

I reply, 'Perhaps some other time.'

This means, I suppose, that he wants money for his trouble. I gave him some and his humour improved. What weak creatures we are! Then, observing the direction of my glance, he remarked:—

'Fiorelli is indeed a genius—is it not so?'

I told him that I did not care to hear about Professor Fiorelli.

'*Un genio!*' he repeated.

'A man of taste,' I corrected.

'*Un vero genio!*' he went on, shaking his old head with conviction. Francesco is becoming decidedly intrusive.

'I do not wish to have his name mentioned, Francesco. He is a talented archæologist who is doing his duty. *Basta!*'

'Talent?' he asked. 'We call it! . . . . '

'Who are you, obstinate old man, to pronounce on the enigma of genius? Your archæologist is a clever man, *e basta!*'

'*Un grande genio,*' he repeated, with the pigheadedness of his race. 'Yes, you may well look at her, signore. She is as near perfection

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as art can make her. A divinity! *Pare la natura!*

‘Art, Nature, Divinity, Genius! How you Italians throw the words about! The confusion in your head, my dear Francesco, would drive me mad.’ And I felt as if I could have murdered him, I did indeed.

Then, seeing that he looked really scared, I tried to laugh; but I only half succeeded, because, at that moment, a curious fancy entered my head, or rather, an intuitive conviction; the conviction, namely, that if I could be allowed to touch her, for one instant only, she would feel my touch and perhaps—ah, God!—perhaps open her eyes with a look of thankfulness—the thankfulness of a poor prisoner who has found one heart that throbs in sympathy with her own sad lot.

I hinted my desire to Francesco in my most engaging and insinuating manner. It is surprising how humble I made myself. I felt I could do anything, good or evil, to obtain my wish. That, no doubt, is the true lover’s spirit.

‘*E impossibile, caro signore,*’ he replied, shrugging his shoulders and pointing at the cap of his official uniform with an expressive gesture.

Then I must try to do without him.

*Pompei, April 26.*—I have made a grievous

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and well-nigh irreparable mistake. I have told Bertha all, all—my whole heart, the whole truth. She shook her head obstinately, and began arguing—‘convincing me,’ as she called it. I told her that the time for discussions was now past. Alas, the gulf—the immeasurable gulf! She even wishes to take me away. She refused to understand me. Then I told her to suspend her judgment for the present, at least. No! Come and see for yourself? No! Then I bowed and left the room. Assuredly I have done my best for all three parties concerned. Three parties? Yes, there are now three of us.

The gulf! But now I am no longer without hope of a comforter. I can afford to lose Bertha who, even in her most expansive moments, never really entered into my ideas and projects.

And what is the truth? Believe it or not here it is.

All yesterday I had a bad headache and lay in bed. Else I could have written down a good many things that occurred to me which I have forgotten by this time again.

And as I lay, there came another dream to me, wonderfully vivid; was it indeed only a dream? I was away, far away, in a calm purple twilight, under the waves. And a well-known voice pronounced these words, ‘*Save me.*’ She also

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told me that she was neither Grecian nor Roman, but the daughter of an ocean king. (I always thought so!) And then! And then . . . she whispered in my ear her name, the sweet name by which, henceforth, I am to know her—*Nerinda*.

Surely, as I tried to explain afterwards to Bertha, the mere fact of my knowing and remembering this name proves that this was no idle dream like others. I swear upon my honour that I have never in my life wilfully deceived others; that I never invented this name; indeed, that I could not invent it if I tried! But Bertha would not listen. The gulf!

‘I suppose it came to you,’ she said at last.

‘It came to me!’ I echoed. ‘Do things happen without a cause? It came to me! Do things come and go as they please? And if so, why did it not come to *you* instead?’

Then she pretended to cry.

One thing is quite certain, and that is, that if they all go on ill-treating me in this fashion, I shall have to take to deceit and dissimulation, however unwillingly I may do it.

Listen, now, to what followed; for all this was only a kind of prelude, although, so far as I am concerned, I was not in the least surprised at what then occurred. Indeed, I was thoroughly

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prepared for it: I may confidently say that I knew it beforehand.

I awoke from this dream, this vision, this visitation, this—visit, at about three o'clock in the morning. That is my usual hour for waking. I felt inspired. Dressing hastily, I crept in the dark along the well-known path to Francesco, and woke him up. The day was barely dawning and there hovered a yellow-brown mist over the mountains. He lighted a candle, for the interior of the museum was still almost dark.

Now that I am quite calm again I can well understand why Francesco should find me in a state of great excitement and ask me what on earth had brought me to him at that extraordinary hour of the night?

What, indeed? Here was a dilemma. I had never thought about that. But I was master of the situation instantly.

'The fact is,' I explained, hastily inventing a ready lie, 'we are leaving to-day, this very morning, and I wished to come once more and thank you for all the trouble you have taken. I may not have time later on—there is always so much to do at the last moment. Please accept this little remembrance from my sister and myself,' and I gave him a bloodstone ring which I happened to be wearing.

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Bloodstone. . . .

‘The signore is too generous,’ he cried, sincerely moved, and trying to kiss my hand. ‘How shall I ever thank you both? But then,’ he added, with a laugh, ‘you must surely come and say good-bye to Professor Fiorelli’s signorina! You have taken so much interest in her. . . .’

‘She is not Professor Fiorelli’s signorina. She is mine.’

‘As you wish, Eccellenza,’ he replied, with a conciliatory smile.

So far good, I thought.

‘Give me a candle, Francesco; and will you please look if the sun has not risen yet?’ That was sly of me.

So he went out through the half-open door all unsuspecting, and took a turn outside on the stones to sniff the morning air. You see I remember the smallest incident; I am something of an artist in my love of detail.

So far good.

And was it to be farewell? Was my devotion to go unrequited, was my faith, my love, my hope, to be shattered without one sign of recognition?

‘Nerinda, Nerinda,’ I prayed, ‘do you not remember?’

And the tears fell—ay, they rained—from my

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eyes. I prayed with the Faith that can move mountains, with the ecstatic rapture of a saint. I lost all shyness; what cared I if the whole world were looking on? How I prayed! And how I gazed!

‘Nerinda, my heart’s desire, my other self—a sign!’

And lo! It happened even as I expected. Her cheeks coloured and her curved lips quivered slightly, ever so slightly, like an anemone flower trembling in the breeze. Life, for one short moment, flowed through those delicate veins. As for her eyes—I gazed, and methought I looked into another world.

‘The sun is rising, signore, and the weather promises. . . .’

‘Come here quickly, Francesco,’ I interrupted, even then still ready to doubt the evidence of my own senses. ‘Now look, Francesco, and tell me honestly, what do you see?’

‘*Pare viva . . .*’ he began, confused.

‘No wonder you are astonished,’ I said calmly. It was my turn to be calm now.

Ah! I knew it, I knew it, I knew it from the first day I saw her.

And in that moment my plan of action was decided. A path of duty lies plain before me.



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I left the building elated, triumphant, convinced. Then, in the course of the morning, I told Bertha all. I thought she would—

I was interrupted in my writing just now. By whom? By a visitor. And do you know who she was? Ah!

I thought Bertha would wish me joy. But no! She has been disappointed in her own love, and I suppose it is natural enough she now wishes to spoil my pleasure. Natural, but not agreeable. The gulf! I shall make no more confidences.

She proposes to go to Naples to-morrow, but I propose to propose something else. *Nous verrons.*

*Villino Dei Fiori, Castellamare, May 2.—*  
The reign of dissimulation has begun. I have atoned for my mistake by a brilliant stroke of policy. I told Bertha that Naples was too noisy and unhealthy, and that my nerves were not yet in as good a state as they should be (those were my exact words, and they seemed to weigh with her!) and that the purer air and country life of this place would do me good. So we have hired this little villa which suits me admirably. A hotel would have been impossible

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for my purpose. I pretend to have forgotten Pompei, and I succeed beyond all expectation. Whenever she tries to test me, by referring to it accidentally (as it were), I laugh and treat the whole matter as a joke. Ha, ha! As I do not yet read anything myself, I have persuaded her to read aloud to me Fouqué's *Undine*, which she does all the more gladly because it is one of her favourite stories. She little guesses what it is that attracts me so particularly in this tale!

It is in this garden that I sit and think, and think, and elaborate my plans. She could never imagine my real motive for living here! But I must be circumspect, and stealthy as a cat.

I am like a general on the eve of a battle, reconnoitring the ground and spying out the enemy's camp.

Who is the enemy?

The whole world.

I cannot go to see Nerinda at present, in order not to attract Bertha's attention. But to atone for that, Nerinda appears to me in my dreams almost whenever I wish, so we meet after all. And this is how I have come to know the truth—*She loves me.*

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

The more I think upon it, the more I hesitate whether to weep or to laugh. Listen. Bertha professes to love me. She regrets bitterly that I have not yet found my ideal. At last I find my ideal. Then she becomes angry. She even mistrusts me. Surely there is something radically wrong with this world.

*Castellamare, May 3, 3.30 a.m.*—My eyes continually wander in the direction of Pompei. But that is forbidden ground at present, although I have made exhaustive surveys of the roads. *Kommt Zeit, kommt Rath.*

*May 4, 3.25 a.m.*—

‘I arise from dreams of thee,  
In the first sweet sleep of night.’ . . .

One kiss—one kiss! And if it costs my life. Besides, I must discuss certain plans with her before taking decisive action. But why my life? Why not that of another? Do the stars care what little atom is extinguished here below?

Who is he that dares to interpose between me and my immortal love? I will make one more attempt.

It has been an ignominious failure.

## NERINDA

I found my way in the grey dawn to Pompei along the small field-paths already marked out for the final triumphant entry. Not a soul saw me! I was obliged to swim the river, bearing my bundle of clothes in one hand. Who cares? I should know the path now in the very darkest night. My life has grown full of chivalry and romance.

How beautifully fresh the air! It did my head good. What relief to be in physical contact with Nature! I am weary of men and their treachery.

Francesco was there and opened the door as usual. He seemed surprised to see me. I went straight to the point.

'Is it impossible for you to open that case? *Even after what you yourself saw the other day?*' I added with emphasis.

'Impossible, dear sir.'

'I would give you enough money.'

'I have a wife and five grown-up children.'

'I will provide for them.'

'It would cost me my official position to accept your proposal, dear sir.'

'What of that? Supposing it cost you your life to refuse it?' I asked seriously.

'The signore is pleased to joke with me,' he replied, smiling. A stupid smile!

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

I tried to explain, I argued, I begged, I threatened. In vain.

What is to be done with such a man?

We shall see. I have done my best.

After that I wandered about carelessly, avoiding her eyes, for I dreaded to see the look of just disappointment in them.

Assuredly, if I were to name the principal characteristic of the Italian people, it would be their mental inaccessibility. True, they are born with a certain amount of ready knowledge, inherited from more talented ancestors, but any fresh idea, however commendable, however luminous, however self-evident—it cannot enter their head. They think themselves perfect: another sign of an exhausted race.

My brain feels different to what it did yesterday. Indeed, it feels different nearly every day. I suppose that is as it should be. '*Malheur à qui ne se contredit pas une fois par jour*,' says Renan.

Returned betimes. It is a long walk. Bertha remains unaware of this escapade, and it gives me pleasure to deceive her and to watch her face. Yes, it warms the cockles of my heart.

*Castellamare, May 5.*—Received a letter from Raymond this morning. He is engaged to be

## NERINDA

married. What a most extraordinary coincidence! Shall I tell him about myself? Perhaps later, when it is a *fait accompli*.

*Castellamare, May 6, 3.30 a.m.*—I live in a dream of bliss. I keep my secret as the miser hoards his gold. Who has just been sitting in this chair? The treasure of an empire would not tempt me to let her name cross my lips. Alas, the dreams wear off towards morning!

11 a.m.—Sirocco again. It blows softly, almost imperceptibly. Islands and continent float in a grey haze. There is a heaviness in the air, a stillness—the stillness of things to come.

8 p.m.—All living things are hushed. Even inanimate Nature seems to feel the spell.

We walked along the beach in the afternoon. There are some picturesque turret-shaped islets out at sea, opposite the mouth of my river.

Bertha and I are longing to explore them. Thank Heaven that we still agree in something! I imagine they are those mentioned by Pliny, who says that the fish there only eat bread thrown into the sea, and refuse to touch any bait which conceals a hook. Wise creatures! Let me follow your example.

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

I picked up a water-worn pebble with a distinct female face on it. How came it there?

I showed it to Bertha. She at once detected some resemblance.

‘Resemblance to whom?’ I asked pointedly.

‘Resemblance to the caricature of a human face,’ she said.

‘Not at all a caricature,’ I told her. ‘It is a portrait.’

And then I threw it away.

There were tears in her eyes.

What a curious girl she is, to grudge me my happiness.

Female jealousy?

Or perhaps it reminded her of someone else. . . .

Her character must be undergoing a complete change, it is becoming altogether abnormal; I have noticed it for some time past. But I pretend not to see.

As we passed near the deep harbour, Nerinda was there, pillowed on the curled surface of a blue wave. There she was—pointing downwards into the depths. Nothing but the sense of a duty still to be performed restrained me from plunging in there and then. She loves me! But I said nothing to Bertha, oh, no! I have learned the

## NERINDA

lesson, the hard lesson, of keeping my own counsel, of closing my lips when my heart is bursting to communicate its joys to my fellow-creatures.

*Villino Dei Fiori, Castellamare, May 8, 3 a.m.—*  
Wind and weather being favourable, we hired a boat to convey us across to those bizarre islets. A truly Byronic spot.

Bertha seemed depressed, but perhaps it is only part of some plan that she is hatching. I must be on my guard. In proportion as her spirits sink, mine rise. This afternoon I positively surpassed myself in wittiness. I made one or two puns that would have convulsed a saint.

Then suddenly I became sad. Why? Because, near the mediæval tower on the summit of the rock, there stands a small fig-tree, all alone among the stones. I was sorry for it.

The magic of love! It softens the heart for all that suffers in solitude.

We looked into a ~~little~~ sea-cave near the base of the rock, whose roof was painted with tremulous garlands of light. The little hushed wavelets throbbed like stolen kisses. Nerinda was there. I read her wishes in her eyes: they are my commands. 'Save me.' This was precisely at 11.35



## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

in the morning. I did not speak to her for fear of Bertha, but I waved my hand. Then Bertha, seeing this, smiled at me, or tried to smile—such a smile! More like a grimace. I always judge people by their way of smiling.

Smile, Bertha; smile, World! Unbelief is sterile: Faith alone creates.

Going home the wind had freshened to a breeze, and I remarked that the waves were tipped with crimson crests. What does it mean? I shall not be long in finding it out.

Bertha saw it too and said that it was only in these climates that one could appreciate the sense of Homer's colour epithets. She likes to pose, I observe. This is something new.

*Castellamare, May 9, 3.30 a.m.*—All these days I have been suffering from a bad headache. Better now.

That which is in my heart shall never be committed to paper. Indeed, I feel as if thought alone constituted a betrayal of trust, a kind of sacrilege. If so, may I be forgiven!

*Castellamare, May 11.*—A final council has just been held, and all the details are settled. The allies have effected a junction. The enemy is in complete ignorance of our position. . . .

## NERINDA

How my ideas change from one hour to another! They are not fixed, apparently. What does it all mean? A struggle is going on. There is no retaining my thoughts. Whenever I pursue them they flit tantalisingly like the phantoms that chase one another before my closed eyes in the interval betwixt sleep and waking. My mind is like a troubled ocean full of eddies and cross currents and whirlpools, where the recollections are suddenly cast up in flashing pictures and again swiftly engulfed.

Surely the whole world is mad. Here is Rubinstein, who writes an ocean symphony and assures me that he detests the sea! I shall never forget those evenings at Peterhoff. He made me play chess till my head ached. A passionate chess player. Moltke, too. All generals ought to be chess players. I am a general.

*May, 12.3 a.m.*—A contrary current.

What is the law?

An institution of mankind. But mankind is liable to error.

What is the moral-sense of man?

A matter of time and place.

What is the life of man?

Even as the grass it is cut down, dried up, and

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

withered. The microcosm counts as nothing—his blood does but fertilise the soil for coming generations.

‘ A dreadful plague in London was  
In the year ‘sixty-five,  
Which swept a hundred thousand souls  
Away—yet I alive !’

I alive! Alive! Why alive? Even so it was pre-ordained.

We have all our appointed tasks, and our appointed life-time, which cannot be prolonged by one second.

Happy are the dead, for their sufferings are ended. Some day—to-morrow, perhaps—this will be said of me. Let it be added, then, that I was not afraid of death, that I died in endeavouring to save others.

And who shall estimate the sufferings, the torture of soul, that one poor human atom must undergo? Ah—my head!

Another current.

Is it right to take the life of man?

Let me rather ask, is it wrong?

I am a poor man—I have but a few shillings in my possession. Then someone comes and

## NERINDA

endeavours to rob me. I defend myself and kill him. The law acquits me. Beautiful law!

I am a poor man—I have but one portion in this world, one treasure, one desire. And he who would rob me of my portion—what shall be done unto him?

Ah! Now I understand the meaning of those crimson-crested waves. *I alive!*

I cannot drive those waves away from my eyes. Doubtless they signify a command.

My father was a soldier and I myself must have inherited soldier instincts; and this idea, in proportion as I have dwelt upon it, has become anything but repugnant or distasteful to me. On the contrary, I reckon it must be pleasant to watch his struggles, to carve him as a dish for the gods, and to behold the warm blood pouring out of a thousand gushing mouths. I suppose this must be the artist's love of re-modelling the raw material, and impressing it with a stamp of his own, the craving of transformation, of making something new out of what was different before. To transform a man into a fountain. . . . How I change! I can now sympathise with the Italians' love of mutilating living things. If I could only do it to the accompaniment of

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a full orchestra! But it must be a peculiar melody, fateful and yet kind. There is a trio in the Seventh Symphony of Beethoven, an orient pearl, gravely glowing. . . .

*May* 13.—She will doubtless appear to me before I start, with final instructions.

How clear my head is! I know I shall succeed.  
*Yet I alive!*

It is accomplished. A thunder of applause has greeted my return home. Pale sunlight is creeping into the room.

And how easy, how voluptuously easy, it is to kill a man—one man, two men; how many were there? I have forgotten; my memory is confused like after a dream. They performed their task; I mine. I seemed to be surrounded by a legion, and the room was full of strange creatures that spoke and shouted at me.

She waved her arm and beckoned to me, but I could not distinguish her voice for the buzzing in my head. . . .

Ah, Nerinda, my joy, you are come.

Lead me the way then. I shall follow you to your calm abode. . . .

. . . . .

## NERINDA

. . . . .  
That was all.

But Lady Bertha sat stunned as with a mighty blow ; she hardly dared to lift her eyes. The last sheet of paper had dropped from her trembling hands. . . .

Darkness was falling, and the familiar objects in the room looked indistinct, and began to assume strange shapes. Outside, the wind shrieked among the pines, for one of those boisterous vernal gales had sprung up, cleansing the air of wintry mists and sweeping the hills in its wild career, till the sturdy mansion seemed to rock on its granite foundation. Down the glen, far away, resounded the moan of the fretful Atlantic.

Then a footman, with velvet step, entered and placed a lamp swiftly, discreetly, on the table at Lady Bertha's elbow. The room was flooded in light. She turned to look, but the door had already closed again.

She began to remember certain little details.

Bloodstone. . . . .

. . . . .  
It struck her, a few days afterwards, when she had found time to collect her senses, that such an event as the murder of Francesco can hardly

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

have passed by unnoticed and that some information might be gained by perusing the newspapers of that period. She wrote for them. For in the confusion that followed her brother's drowning accident (as she thought it) there had not been time to think of such matters. What with his complete mental collapse, produced (as she imagined) by that accident, and the consequent care and responsibility that devolved upon her, every moment was fully occupied. She had left for Scotland on the same morning, and had hardly quitted her brother's side from that time till the day when he had finally found a home, for many long months prior to his presumably definite cure, in a private institution for mental maladies near Neufchatel. What days those were! Days of anguish and tears! By the time she read the papers again the whole affair was naturally forgotten.

They came, the old newspapers, and this is what the Neapolitan *Corriere Partenopeo* had reported to its readers of that year :—

*Pompei, May 14.*—A sanguinary deed was perpetrated last night in our usually so quiet neighbourhood, and its victim is none other than *Francesco Sbordino*, a Government official, and senior guide to the ruins of Pompei. The peculiarity of the site chosen renders it doubly mysterious. . . .

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No details are known at present, beyond this, that his body was found, mutilated almost beyond recognition, at the entrance of the local museum, where the unfortunate man has slept nearly every night for the last eight years as keeper of the relics which it contains. These relics seem likewise to have been tampered with. The robbers have doubtless chosen Saturday with the express intention of carrying off his weekly wages, which are regularly paid to him at two o'clock on that afternoon. In this they were disappointed, as he had providentially left the amount with his family before retiring to the museum for the night. Indeed, it seems that they must have been disturbed at their work, perhaps by some noise of a passing country cart, for they omitted to possess themselves of a valuable ring which he wore on his finger—a recent gift from a distinguished foreigner. Universal sympathy is felt for the family of this highly-respected old man, who seems to have had not an enemy in this world. . . . He leaves a wife and five children. . . . Poor widow . . . poor children. . . .

*Naples, May 15.*— . . . Immediately upon the receipt of the news of this outrage, Signor Verde-Grisetti, our energetic Minister of Public Works, who happens to be in Naples at this





## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

moment, left for the spot with some other gentlemen. The museum presented a spectacle of chaotic confusion. Some of the unique relics have suffered considerable damage in consequence of the scuffle that must have ensued. Lovers of art—and who is not a lover of art in our country?—will greatly regret that one of the gems of the collection, Case No. 12, containing the plaster-cast of a young woman, reproduced according to the ingenious process of our immortal Fiorelli, is completely shattered—that this *chef d'œuvre*, with its clinging draperies and delicately-formed limbs, is now reduced to a mass of shapeless fragments. . . . It is understood that Signor Verde-Grisetti has convinced himself of the necessity of a complete reorganisation of the system at present in vogue. The museum is to be entirely re-modelled. . . .

*Pompei, May 16.* — Amongst those arrested on suspicion is a certain *Antonio Giuseppone* of Castellamare, who was formerly a workman employed on the excavations of Pompei, but has lately been dismissed for some reason or other. He was unpopular with our workmen, and—a significant detail!—is the only one of those arrested who could claim a personal acquaintance with the deceased *capoguida*. There are

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witnesses who testify that they have heard him using menacing language in referring to the deceased as the cause of his dismissal. For the rest, there seems to be not a word of truth in what he says. This individual did not return to his home on that night, but claims to have slept in the Amphitheatre of Pompei, and to have done this for some time past, in the hopes of obtaining re-employment in the morning. We shall see! . . . The mystery must be cleared up—the honour of our town is at stake. . . .

*Castellamare, May 17.*—As a curious sequel, or rather concomitant, of the crime of Pompei, we learn, from a private but trustworthy source, that the American duke, to whose generosity the *capoguida* Francesco was indebted for the ring, was rescued out of the harbour of Castellamare in a drowning condition, on the very morning after the outrage. The robbers—for it is now clear that there must have been a gang of them—had doubtless guessed his wealth to be on a par with his magnanimity, and, studying his habit of early rising, had thought to kill two birds with one stone. It is not known how the assault took place, or even whether, and to what extent, this gentleman

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

was robbed, for he was completely prostrated, as may be imagined; and his sister, mortally terrified, left the same morning for England in his company. We do not wonder at their decision! Our heart beats in sympathy with the amiable signorina! Our compliments to the signore on his narrow escape! May he have a speedy recovery and bear us no ill-will! There is, indeed, universal regret at their departure—they have made themselves many friends during their short stay among us. Let us add: if this is the way that foreign noblemen are to be treated in the very hearts of our cities, is it likely that the tourist seasons will continue to be as satisfactory as formerly? . . .

There were numberless other references to the incident in foreign and English papers, and the end of the whole matter was thus summed up in the words of the *Times*:—

*June 2.*—Thanks to the vigilance of the Italian police, there has been no attempt at a repetition of the crime of the 13th ultimo at Pompei. Travellers, if not deterred by the heat, may be confidently recommended to return to their former haunts. The incriminated individual, *Antonio Giuseppone*, has been condemned on

## NERINDA

circumstantial evidence, and will probably end his days in the prisons of Nisida or Ponza, there being no capital punishment in Italy. He persistently refused to reveal his accomplices, but there is reason for believing that some of his relations are implicated and that they are in hiding among the precipitous and woody hills above Castellamare. . . .

## Impromptu

*Scene*—Hell. The Great Palace of Pandemonium.

*Persons*—SATAN in Council, surrounded by his MINISTERS OF STATE and ANGELS, according to their station and degree. POWERS OF DARKNESS, UNCLEAN SPIRITS, etc., etc.

*(Clash of cymbals and drums.)*

SATAN.

*Ahem !*—This evening We have summoned you  
To hear, if need be, your enlightened views  
Upon a matter of no small concern,  
Whose hungry spectre gnaws away Our rest  
And bodes calamity to this Our realm  
And all of you. We will be brief, but clear.  
Attention! 'Tis a most notorious fact—  
An open secret these last thousand years—  
That human souls have lost their former dread

## IMPROMPTU

Of This Our Majesty. They quake no more  
At mention of Our Name : they even doubt  
The Fact of Our Existence ! We do blush  
To utter these unpalatable truths.

*(Movement of suppressed anger amongst the  
Hosts.)*

What says Beelzebub ?

FIRST MINISTER.

'Tis but too true.

'Satan's a myth,' they say.

SECOND MINISTER.

How shall we now

Consolidate this ancient empire's bulk ?

Where find recruits ?

THIRD MINISTER.

Hadst Thou but given ear

To my proposals nineteen hundred years

Ago, and listened—

SATAN (*sternly*).

Thus the human kind,

By losing their belief in Us, have lost

One Cause of Fear, and gained *some* liberty,

To Our own damage.

*(Murmurs.)*

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

Times, alas ! have changed,  
And now it doth behove us One and all  
To act with resolution, lest Our Realm  
Totter with swart convulsion to its fall  
In unsubstantial Chaos, and dissolve  
Inglorious. Mark Our rede. The human kind  
Have now attained a further stage—a stage  
Which promises them freedom *absolute*  
And ease unspeakable, and calm content. . . .  
Who'll unperplex the case ?

### FIRST MINISTER.

The human kind  
Have lost belief in Him who rules in Heaven.  
They mock His stories and His promises.  
And thus a prospect dawns before their eyes,  
A prospect of such careless-happy lives  
As never, surely, could have been foreseen  
When, on creation's morning, was wound up  
Their complicated engine of disease  
And fear. A grievous oversight ! For while  
They dreaded Him in Heaven we caught at least  
The renegades ; but, as it stands. . . .

### SECOND MINISTER.

A gross  
And lamentable oversight !

## IMPROMPTU

SATAN.

But not

An oversight on Our part. There are those  
Amongst you who will doubtless call to mind  
That, when Creation's scheme was first discussed  
Between Ourselves and Him who rules in Heaven,  
We pointed out its errors and withheld  
Our approbation. Then arose the schism  
That soon—*ahem!*—conduced to Our defeat  
And banishment—*ahem!*—but why revive  
The melancholy Past? . . . If yet We shared  
His sceptre and His empire as of old  
With undivided purpose, these alarms  
Would aye be slumbering in the lap of time.  
But since that most unfortunate Divorce  
Our strength declines, and both These Realms  
    have lost  
Their credit. We foresaw it. But He scorned  
Our counsel.

AN ANGEL (*advancing to the Throne*).

If it please your Majesty:—

An hour ago I happened to converse  
With one that yesterday from Earth arrived  
To Tartarus and black perdition damned—



## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

Head foremost in the scalding mere he pitched  
With hideous shriek, and welt'ring lay where  
rolls

Red Phlegethon's tormented wave and reeks  
Prodigious stench of naphtha-dripping grots  
Noisome, incessant—one whose powerful  
Position 'mongst his fellow-creatures may  
Entitle him to give a true account  
Of what is now their faith. I found him packed  
In a consignment of ten thousand souls  
From London, or New York, or Aberdeen—  
I don't remember the precise address—  
But if your Majesty desires—

SATAN.

Produce him.

(THE ANGEL *departs and instantly returns*  
*with HUMAN SHAPE on pitchfork, sleek*  
*and steaming, and attired in shreds of*  
*dripping clerical garments. He deposits*  
*THE SHAPE before the Throne, where it*  
*presently unrolls itself and begins to kick*  
*and wriggle convulsively.*)

(SATAN *surveys THE SHAPE, recognises it, and*  
*laughs immoderately.*)

## IMPROMPTU

MINISTERS and ANGELS (*aside*).

An old acquaintance !

SATAN (*to SHAPE, sternly*).

Speak the truth for once !  
Tell all these present whether, whilst on Earth,  
Thou harbouredst any serious belief  
In this Our True Existence, or a dread  
Of all the punishments which We are apt  
And willing to inflict. Didst thou conceive  
Sincere respect for This Our Majesty ?

THE SHAPE.

Alas, sir—your Majesty—none whatever. But  
lay no blame on me ! The fact is, I was  
educated in this regrettable ignorance by such  
as professed Faith in Him who rules in  
Heaven, and you know what kind of people  
they are. I was one of them myself, by pro-  
fession, and we had not the slightest fear of  
your Majesty, or dread of your punishments  
because—because we thought you were only a  
—a symbol—a type—pardon me !—a contrivance  
to scare weak souls into obedience. But now  
(*sobbing*) I know better, and if—

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

SATAN.

So it appears. And did this lack of fear  
Contribute to thy earthly happiness?

THE SHAPE (*pulls at its garments nervously  
and wipes perspiration*).

No—yes, it did—I mean, no—Dear me! where  
am I? . . .

SATAN.

This is no place for lying. Speak the truth.

THE SHAPE.

I will, I will. (But what very awkward  
questions!) Most unavoidably it did thus con-  
tribute. And why? Because it gave me a  
sense of partial freedom and relief from fear.  
Because, you understand, because—

(*Movement among the Hosts.*)

SATAN.

Enough. Didst thou hold any true belief  
In Him who rules in Heaven, or any hope  
Of those emoluments which He is apt  
And willing to bestow? Didst entertain  
Respect for His Celestial Majesty?

## IMPROMPTU

### THE SHAPE (*evasively*).

I did preach respect for His Majesty; indeed I made it the business of my life to do so; but . . .

(SATAN *laughs once more loudly.*)

### THE SHAPE.

Of course I considered myself much too enlightened to believe in rewards or punishments of any kind. No, I had no fear of His Majesty—there are not many left of those who have, not among my own acquaintances at least, and they are reckoned as the most pious in the whole country. And this lack of fear of Him did round my earthly happiness, for I thus breathed absolute freedom. We all did. Fearing no task-masters, in Heaven or Hell, we all lived cheerfully. Neither did I fear my equals—for I accounted none better than myself. . . . If your Majesty had only given me due warning of what was to come! . . . Only let me return to earth and I will gladly devote my life to preaching your sole glory and . . . oh, oh, please. . . .

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

SATAN.

Others remain on Earth who execute  
That task to our entire satisfaction. (*To ANGEL*)  
Remove it.

(*ANGEL disappears with SHAPE, on pitchfork,  
shrieking and vociferating.*)

SATAN (*addressing assembly*).

Thus the matter, then, doth lie.  
The human kind have medicined their sight.  
They have abandoned every fear of Us  
And Him who rules in Heaven—they comprehend  
Our separate devices and our aims.  
Would We were still united as of yore !  
But that's past cure. Now to the point. To-day—  
To-day they mean to regulate afresh  
The ancient scheme of hopeless anarchy  
Which on creation's day was framed—a scheme  
That (but for some mere technical defects)  
Would have outlasted all eternity.  
To-morrow . . .  
To-morrow they will grapple with that vast  
Ineffable confusion whence both We  
And He who rules in Heaven, derive Our Life,  
*And whence of Our Existence doth proceed*

## IMPROMPTU

*The sole justification.* Do you grasp  
The import of Our language? And what then?  
(*Awed silence.*)

They mock our threats and bribes. They cure  
our plagues.

They thwart our lightnings. Are we not become  
A laughing-stock to children? Would we were  
Still fast united as in days of yore!  
Then both realms prospered — now they both  
decay.

My warning has come true : we cannot live  
Except conjoined. The principle of Good  
Exists alone in virtue of the Bad.

## SECOND MINISTER.

A most deplorable dilemma !

## SATAN.

This

Is not a time for petulant complaints.  
Unless the spacious realms of Heaven and Hell  
Are to become bereft, and unrefreshed  
With young and lusty broods, We must contrive  
To force the human kind to reassume  
Their twilight lives of inward questionings  
And doubts and apprehensions. *Fear* must be  
Their emblem and their theme. For this it is

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

That stamps them with its own peculiar curse  
And constitutes their difference from the beasts  
Of earth, who nothing fear and nothing lack.  
'Tis *fear* supplies recruits for both our realms !  
The meanest actions of their daily lives,  
And its most solemn issues, must be hatched  
In thunderladen atmosphere of dread.  
Now, since they fear not Us, nor Him in Heaven,  
Whom shall they fear ?

### THIRD MINISTER.

The Human Shape confessed  
They dreaded not their equals.

### A SUBORDINATE ANGEL.

Let them fear  
Their servants.

*(A general murmur of surprise. MINISTERS are  
seen hurrying to and fro, comparing notes.  
Then profound silence while all eyes are  
turned on HIS MAJESTY.)*

### SATAN.

Good. So be it. And let those  
On whom it is incumbent, undertake  
That this, Our new enactment, be upheld  
Throughout the whole extent of Our Domain.

## IMPROMPTU

Each to his several post ! the greater Powers  
To undermine the social state of man,  
Sunder the ancient ties of servitude,  
Tumble the rich, the wise, the old of line,  
And raise his natural slave, the common herd  
Of lowly birth, engendering novel ills  
Calamitous : the minor Imps, meanwhile,  
To compass minor mischiefs. Recollect :—  
One joy destroyed outright is better far  
Than fifty scotched.

Depart ! And let Us learn  
Timely and good reports ! We now adjourn.  
( *The assembly disperses amidst violent thunder-*  
*claps.* )



## Nocturne

I OPENED the casement and looked out upon the night.

At first all was still.

Then, slowly, there grew upon my ears a confusion of faint moans. Every town, every hamlet, every cottage gave forth sounds. There were voices of little children, of strong men and weak, of righteous and unrighteous, and all cried out in pain—cries of fear and agony and blasphemous despair. And the voices grew louder until I could understand not a few spoken words. They lamented dismally amongst themselves in many tongues:—

‘How I suffer! What have I done to deserve this! Not a day of health—not a ray of hope! Save me! Kill me for I can endure it no longer! I am bereft! Forsaken! I languish in chains! Oh, the shame of it! Oh, the pain of it! Is this my reward? I have prayed in vain! Ah, why was I born! None so wretched as I! Doomed

## NOCTURNE

to long years of suffering—to a painful death!  
Spare me! Kill me! Be merciful and kill me!  
Kill!’

Then said I to myself:—

‘This is the plaint of suffering humanity—a  
plaint such as might melt the Fiend to pity.’

And the voices grew yet louder and more  
piteous, a wail of bitterness, a discord of hideous  
shrieks, that rang into the still night, ear-piercing,  
heart-rending.

And I marvelled, and said:—

‘How comes it that I have hitherto been deaf  
to these distressful tones?’

And, as I continued to hearken, a change crept  
over the universal plaint. For the howls and  
groans, the prayers and curses, ceased to sound  
in their separate manifestations, and the discords,  
melting, mingled, like the strains of an Æolian  
harp, to form a symphony of tremendous chords,  
shrill and deep, that filled the air. As when the  
south wind, in furious gusts, breathes through  
the open reeds of a mighty organ, till all is  
drowned in a seething ocean of melody; even  
so this harmonious torrent poured fitfully upon  
the night—now it swelled, now sunk low and  
swelled again, and never wholly ceased.

Passing wonderful! For lo! it was the self-  
same familiar chant that had sung in my ears ever

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

since the day of my birth, but into whose origin it was not given me to inquire. And now, as my ear grew conscious, and once more accustomed to the throbbing sound, I found it, in truth, not altogether unpleasant.

Then I understood.

And I said:—

‘Doubtless there is some being who takes pleasure in this music and hath contrived it for his own delectation.’

## In the Red Sea

IT began in the Red Sea.

Let me at once admit, gentlemen, that the matter is quite unintelligible to me. Convince yourselves that I am perfectly calm. I do not pose as a prophet, a seer, a dreamer of dreams. I do not profess to know what it means or whether, indeed, it means anything. ~~That will be for you to decide.~~ Is it a mere accident? A warning? A punishment? Who knows? . . .

Alcohol? \_ Certainly not. I have been accustomed to it all my life and perhaps I drink more than some men. Why not? I am my own master and those who know me well may have guessed why I sometimes drink more than necessary. They know that if I indulged in excesses there would be some excuse for me. For twenty years I have *tried to forget*. In vain. My life has been clouded by an

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

affliction such as falls to the lot of very few. My happiness has been blasted. I wonder, gentlemen, if you fully realise what these words mean? I doubt it.

But let that pass. Look at me! I am old and robust. I have served in a dozen campaigns. My hand is as steady as yours. I have never suffered from any of the evils incident to an abuse of spirits.

Spirits. . . .

Are there spirits?

Perhaps it is a spirit.

It comes often nowadays. I see it before me, on all sides of me, and *behind me*. Yes, I see it behind me. You, who know everything—how do you explain that? It used to come much seldomer. Nowadays, the moment my mind is unoccupied, the moment I am not actively engaged in some pursuit or conversation, there it is, staring at me. It lies in wait for my idle moments. That is what has made me so nervous. I used to be anything but excitable, but now I do and say the strangest things in order to escape from it. It wears me out.

You would not believe how I suffer. . . .

It began in the Red Sea.

## IN THE RED SEA

We were coming home, last year, from India, and just entering the Gulf of Suez. It was prodigiously hot weather — the hottest I ever remember. I have made the trip about forty times. Perhaps the heat had something to do with it. The heat affects some persons strangely. . . .

I recollect that we sat up on deck, three or four of us, to a late hour. It was past midnight, but old campaigners like ourselves keep out an extra bottle of whisky and buy our soda water before the bar closes. The lights were out. But the moon was magnificent. I never saw such a fine moon, and I have seen a good many. It seemed to soar in the sky like a living thing. We were running close to the shore, and one could see every line of those African mountains, parched and mysterious, with their fantastic peaks and clefts. A barren desolation — almost worse than India. Someone — I think it was Major Keane — said that there was good lion-shooting still to be had, and hyenas, no doubt. . . .

Hideous brutes, hyenas.

Then I told them about my sport with the lions in Kattywar many years ago. I believe there are not many of them left now. The Ghuzerati lion, you know, has generally not

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

much of a mane. He seems to feel the indignity of it and looks unhappy. Now the tiger never looks unhappy.

Then Keane put down his glass and said:—

‘I have met with an exception, general. I remember once wounding a tigress in Bangalore, an enormous beast. We tracked her to a nullah, where she lay dying beside a pool of dirty water. Couldn’t move—wounded in the spine. And, Lord! you should have seen the expression on her face. It was horrible—perfectly human, I assure you, perfectly human. The skin was spoilt but I kept the head and had it set up on a round shield. Good head, capital head!’

I am a weak old fool in some things, but I cannot help it. Whenever others talk of suffering, I must always think of my poor daughter. She was all I had in this world. She died nearly twenty years ago. Twenty years. I might have forgotten by this time. Curiously enough, I cannot recall her exact features. I have often spent hours trying to do so. But it is not so easy as you might think to call up a vanished face again. Have you ever tried?

Sometimes her face visits me in my dreams, but it leaves me, waking.

## IN THE RED SEA

I nursed her through a long illness. And how she suffered! My friends hardly realise to what an extent this bereavement has weighed on my mind. I try to be cheerful. But the sudden recollection, at times, positively unnerves me.

It was the same that evening. I could not listen to them any longer. I got up to go to my berth.

‘Turning in already, general?’

*Cep*

‘Yes. I suppose I must try to sleep an hour or two.’

‘Why not sleep on deck in this heat?’

‘I dislike the moon. Good-night.’

‘Dislike the moon! Ha, ha! Good-night!’

But it was vain to attempt to sleep. The heat was intense and not a breath of air entered the cabin. I tossed about for an hour or more. Then I gradually became more drowsy. I caught myself repeating scraps of ridiculous conversation—a sign of weariness, they say. I remember thinking of that stuffed tiger head.

Everyone was asleep. The ship was dark and quiet. There was not a sound save the regular throbbing of the screw and the swirl of the water at the ship’s side. I suppose it was two or three o’clock. But the moon was still bright. She must be on my side of the



## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

ship, I calculated. I hoped she would not come down as low as my port. I detest the moon shining on me—ask any old Anglo-Indian and he will tell you there is nothing more unhealthy. Europeans know nothing about the moon in southern climates. Sometimes they suffer for it. I have seen a man totter home, looking exactly like a corpse, after sleeping a few hours in the moonlight.

I suppose I slept, after all, for about half an hour. Yes, I must have dozed. Then I suddenly woke up with the feeling that something was wrong. You know that feeling? The feeling as if one were no longer alone? And, sure enough, there was something looking into my cabin from the outside. My window looked straight on to the water. The object was round and bright, and filled up the port-hole exactly. I looked at it. There was not a shadow of doubt about the matter.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes to see more clearly. Was I awake? I pinched myself. I was as wide awake as you are. It never moved. At first I could distinguish nothing more than a luminous disc.

The moon?

Nothing of the kind. It might have been the moon, so far as roundness and whiteness

## IN THE RED SEA

were concerned. But it was not the moon. For, as I continued to look, I was surprised to discover features painted upon it. It was a face—a mask. I saw it distinctly.

Ah! that tiger story. . . .

A tiger's face?

No. Not exactly.

A human face?

Also not—not quite human.

The features partook both of the man and of the tiger! For the eyes were human in shape and meaning, the rest was of the beast. And it ~~was completely round and white~~. Conceive it, if you can. It looked in at the port-hole and stared at me. 2

All this, gentlemen, is perfectly true. I can discuss it quite dispassionately—I take a rational view of the matter. I said to myself at the time: the nerves play strange tricks occasionally, especially upon persons who have lived long in unhealthy climates. Then I remember saying, 'Wake up! Wake up! you are half asleep still!' But I was not half asleep. And yet I was not frightened beyond all measure.

Why?

Because, in spite of its hellish disguise, the countenance—the human part of it—was familiar to me.

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It had visited me before, many times, in my dreams.

I think I can hear you say, 'Optical illusion.' How I hate those words! I willingly admit that we may be the dupes of our imagination now and then. But I know too much! Besides, why should you disbelieve me? Do I look like a liar? I have not that reputation. Let me therefore tell you, once and for all, that I am past persuading against what I know to be a fact.

What happened next? I slowly stretched out my arm, and, without taking my eyes off the face, turned on the electric light. It vanished. Then I turned it off. It was there again. But a change was taking place. It began to die, slowly and painfully. It gnashed its ferocious fangs in agony. It gasped and struggled for breath. The eyelids quivered a while, and closed. Then they suddenly opened wide once more. It looked at me. Just like she did! Suddenly it was withdrawn; it had melted away before my eyes; and a breath of air—I felt it distinctly—came into the cabin.

I looked for my whisky bottle, found it, and then took a turn on deck in my pyjamas. They were all lying about asleep. It was an hour before sunrise—the quietest hour. How quiet

## IN THE RED SEA

a ship can be! When I returned to my cabin I fully expected to see it again. But it never came and I slept soundly. . . .

I only saw it once again during that voyage, but it made a more fearful impression on me, for up to that moment I had been inclined to believe—I had secretly hoped—that I had experienced nothing but a kind of vivid dream. We were off Port Said. I was paying the steward for something and thrust my hand into my pocket to take out a shilling. At that moment I had a curious presentiment that something was about to happen—a peculiar feeling that I often have nowadays. I took out the shilling, looked at it, and there, before my very eyes, was the face graven in miniature upon the coin. I fainted away, and there was some little commotion. Since that day I have never been the same man. It is a living reality to me. And it will never leave me. It has become a companion for life. I know!

A day or two later, when I was sufficiently recovered from the shock, I mentioned the matter to the ship's doctor. He was rather astonished.

'Seen it before?'

'Only once.' And I related all the circumstances.

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

'Drink?' he suggested.

'No.'

'Touch of the sun, maybe.'

'Or the moon . . .'

Then he endeavoured to prove to me that it was a mere optical illusion. His arguments doubtless represented the medical view of the case, and they so discouraged me that I determined not to mention the matter in future to anyone. Perhaps I ought to have done so. Latterly, indeed, I have not been so sure of myself. Yes, gentlemen, I may as well confess that I am beginning to be afraid . . . afraid . . . I have fears which I dare not put into words. Things cannot go on in this fashion. How will it end?

Every day there is some new difficulty. Since that affair at the Club, I dislike being left alone in the streets. For nowadays I not only see it; I have begun to hear it. It comes into the room with me. And after I have been for some time in one place, it drives me out. I see it everywhere. Whenever I think of *her*, it comes. From the clouds, from the houses, it stares down upon me. It expands and contracts in unearthly fashion. I see it plainly in the eyes of a friend—in the jewel of a ring. And, imagine to yourselves—yesterday, whilst crossing the Serpentine

## IN THE RED SEA

Bridge, I happened to glance over the water. There it lay, enormous, with half-closed eyes, stretched in horrid grimace from one shore to the other. . . .

I have forgotten to tell you when I first saw it behind me. That was three weeks ago. I suddenly left London for Whitehurst (I cannot remain long in one place nowadays), although I knew that this house would call up old memories. I ought not to have gone, but I went. It was cold and foggy. In the evening I wrote in the old library. I used to detest writing, but now it distracts me. I write feverishly and never pause to think. That evening, however, I must have paused to think. I said to myself:—

‘I have escaped from it for to-day.’

I wrote, and then paused again.

‘Have I?’

And then I said to myself:—

‘I believe I felt it enter the room behind me.’

I took up my pen again.

‘It is looking at me out of the fireplace.’

I began to write again, or, rather, I pretended to write busily—even as I am doing at this moment—knowing full well that what I had said was true. But the pen refused to

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

work, and then, without turning my head, I saw it. It was looking at me from behind! I saw it distinctly, even — *even as I see it now. . . .*

My God! How will it end?

## Anacreontic

NIMBLE wagtail, wherefore run  
In the fiery noonday sun ?  
Sprightly fowl, in livery gray,  
Why not shun the scorching ray,  
Why not rest a while content  
Till Apollo's rage relent ?  
I, secure in rosy bowers,  
Dream away the flaming hours—  
Dream away in slumberous ease  
Fears that harass, doubts that tease ;  
Dream, and with prophetic eye  
Jove's exalted aims espy.  
His arrangement wisely bends  
All his works to various ends :  
Sparrows hop and lizards creep,  
Wagtails run and sages sleep.  
Jove for things of every kind  
Happiness contrives to find,  
Into every element  
Some inhabitant he's sent.  
In the earth's recesses bleak



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Sightless moles their substance seek,  
In the air the gnats meander,  
In the fire the salamander  
Broods upon the crimson flame.  
Wagtail, you your tastes proclaim  
By the water cool and clear  
Of the silver-margined mere.  
Sober one! I envy not  
Such an unconvivial lot.  
Watery fashions I disdain.  
Give me wine! All else is vain.  
Some with hoarded gold are blest—  
Give me wine! And take the rest.  
I'll not share a cheerless pleasure—  
Give me Bacchus! He's my treasure!  
Hark'ee, wagtail: Mend your ways;  
Life is brief, Anacreon says,  
Brief its joys, its ventures toilsome:  
Wine befriends them—water spoils 'em.  
Who's for water? Wagtail, you?  
Give me wine! I'll drink for two!

## The Ignoble

IT was in the depths of winter some twenty years ago. We were sitting up late, a party of four, round an immense fire, at the country house of my brother-in-law in the Dordogne. The new arrival of that morning was the then Minister of Justice, Monsieur Henri de B——, a cousin of our host, and a pleasant man of undoubted ability whose independent action in the notorious Vignal case has been deservedly praised. I had never met him before; indeed, it was the first time that he had visited the district. A prodigious wolf hunt was already organised for the next day (weather permitting) in honour of his coming.

The conversation had turned upon the recent catastrophe of the Tay Bridge in Scotland, a lamentable disaster that will be fresh, no doubt, in the memory of everyone.

‘Truly horrible,’ said our host. ‘It is difficult to conceive any form of death more harrowing.’

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The Minister remarked :—

‘I can conceive more distressful accidents.’

‘Doubly horrible,’ added our other guest, a neighbour and a retired army surgeon, ‘occurring, as it did, in the pitch-black night, in that howling tempest. . .’

‘On the contrary, Monsieur, I venture to think that we must regard that as an alleviating circumstance.’

Our host said :—

‘I believe you are right, Henri. I was once eye-witness of an accident that seemed to me far more horrible on that very account. I happened to be walking, one cloudless afternoon, along the path that runs at the edge of the Rhine-fall of Schaffhausen. Imagine my surprise on seeing, not far away, a boat containing some dozen ladies and gentlemen, visitors at my hotel, and with whom I had already exchanged a few words of civility. I called to warn them of the evident danger, but although they must surely have heard me, they seemed to be entirely occupied with their rowing. Then the truth dawned upon me. They were already caught in the terrific current and the men strained every nerve to row up stream again. But it was too late. Ah, my dear Henri, what a sickening spectacle ! Those two or three minutes were prolonged to an eternity. As the boat

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approached the fatal edge it was drawn forwards with inconceivable rapidity. Then the men suddenly dropped their oars, and a scream came from the boat—a scream such as I hope never to hear again. It leaped like lightning over the edge and I saw nothing but a confused mass of brightly-coloured dresses mingling with the rainbows and mists that rose up to meet them from the steaming abyss. Not a particle of them was ever found—they must have been literally torn to shreds. A horrible death! When one thinks of those happy young people, within a stone's throw of land—the glorious sun shining overhead . . .'

'Horrible, yes,' replied the Minister. 'Your illustration is, from the point of view of the horrible, doubtless an improvement, in various ways, upon the Scotch catastrophe. But there are yet worse deaths; there are ignoble deaths. Let me explain myself. I use that word as opposed to noble. Ignoble deaths are always horrible, and sometimes more. This was a horrible death, but it was not an ignoble one.'

'A fine distinction,' said the doctor. 'Besides,' he added, 'it was merciful, inasmuch as it was sudden. These poisonings by prussic acid, these fallings into vats of melted sugar or into agricultural machines, are all quick deaths. What are

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two or three minutes? On the other hand, a lingering fatal disease is too long—the sufferer enjoys a respite, an interval of forgetfulness, of hope. No patients so hopeful as those who suffer from hopeless diseases. Therefore an agony must be protracted to a proper length of time: it must be neither too short, nor too long.’

‘You are an ogre,’ I said.

‘A harmless *blagueur*,’ added my brother-in-law, ‘like all military men.’

‘I agree with you, Monsieur,’ said the Minister. ‘A particle of hope, a momentary release from pain, destroys the artistic effect.’

‘The artistic effect!’

We all laughed. It was characteristic of him to throw his whole soul into a subject. I observed:—

‘Your Excellency is not easily satisfied. Let me suggest, as the *ne plus ultra* of ignoble deaths, the possibility of being buried alive. In this instance, you will admit, we pass a sufficiently disagreeable quarter of an hour, an uninterrupted agony of body and mind, a sensation of utter hopelessness.’ . . .

‘Well, yes . . . perhaps,’ mused the Minister. ‘But I think the agony might, under certain circumstances, be protracted yet further. And it is such an extremely important element—that

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duration of time. In a coffin the air would soon be exhausted, I fear.' We all laughed again: he dilated *con amore* upon the gruesome subject. 'And then, sir—while we are treating of this question—I think that a premature burial is not, for another reason, entirely satisfactory. It does not exhaust the full capabilities of suffering. Why? For the simple reason that there is something worse than this sheer hopelessness of which you speak. Yes, there is something infinitely worse. I conceive that there must be cases on record in which the victim, while realising the hopelessness of his position, is tormented, in addition, by the knowledge that friends are close at hand, eager to help, if they but knew of his plight. Would you not regard that as an aggravation, an æsthetic refinement?'

'Certainly. That point of view has never struck me before. And I think I could cite a case in illustration. I lately read of a shoemaker—one of a large party—who accidentally slipped into the crater of Mount Vesuvius and was suspended head downwards and at a great depth by his coat, which had miraculously caught on a projecting rock. He hung over the awful cauldron not daring to move, or even to call out, for fear of shaking himself free, besides dreading every minute to lose consciousness in the sulphur fumes and

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drop down. His friends on the height shouted down to him, utterly powerless to help, but he dared not answer. At last they went away. Perhaps they thought him dead. Imagine his feelings.'

'And yet,' he objected, 'I fear he may have been buoyed up by some shadow of hope — however faint. And that would impair the perfect harmony.'

'He was saved in the end, after hanging there for four days.'

'He was saved!' He said it in a tone of bitter disappointment. 'That ruins the situation. Besides—an agony of four days! Surely that is too long. I consider twelve hours a substantial measure.'

'You reason like a philosopher.'

The doctor added with enthusiasm:—

'His Excellency speaks like a true artist and connoisseur.'

The doctor resumed the subject:—

'Permit me to submit to your Excellency's consideration the following example, which I trust may meet with your approval. Some fifteen years ago I was called, at Saint Etienne, to view, unprofessionally, the remains of a stoker who had met with a singular fate. It seems that the poor wretch had climbed, presumably for the sake of

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coolness—it was in the heat of summer—into some part of an immense unfinished furnace. He fell asleep there, and during this interval the entrance was bricked up and the fire lighted. It was only next day that his absence was remarked and the furnace opened (an expensive piece of work) at the suggestion of one of his fellow-workers, who remembered having seen the unhappy man creep in. The men all agreed in stating that they had heard unnatural roarings in the furnace that died away as the fire grew hotter.'

'I congratulate you, my friend,' I said. 'That last stroke, especially, was masterful.'

'You have brought us a good step forward, Monsieur,' said the Minister. 'And I am particularly thankful to you for this illustration, as it supports my previous contention. For this is, decidedly, a more ignoble form of death than a premature burial, in so far as it is even less natural and less decorous; and, in addition, I cannot but think that the agony was prolonged to more than that bad quarter of an hour of which we spoke. Only imagine—a large roomy furnace as opposed to a narrow coffin! And then—that delicate embellishment—the proximity of friends! Only a foot of brick and mortar between life and death. . . Yes, we are narrowing the sphere. And yet, from an artistic point of view, this case leaves



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much to be desired. It suffers, in my humble opinion, from a most serious defect.'

'How so?' we all asked.

He replied:—

'The ignoble becomes intensified in proportion as it afflicts those who are not ignoble. What is a shoemaker? A stoker? Ignoble personages. The quality must be brought into sharper relief: to the bodily suffering there must be superadded a mental and moral agony such as we cannot suppose ignoble persons to appreciate. For, let us freely confess, they are like men of another nation in this, that their sufferings do not appeal to us.'

'The impalement of ten thousand Chinamen leaves me cool,' interrupted the doctor.

'Very true, Monsieur, but I was referring exclusively to accidental deaths, for to the ignoble ones devised by man against man there is, I fear, no conceivable limit. And I was saying that the sufferings of vulgar people are rarely interesting. Only indifferent authors treat of the emotions of the lower classes, and no man of taste reads them. The great dramatists knew why they selected exalted personages to suffer a tragic, or noble, fate, and the German Schopenhauer—I think it is he—has correctly explained the matter when he says that they fall from a greater height than

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the common herd. The same applies to ignoble fates. Tragic deaths move our tears, ignoble ones our disgust; and I conceive that the extreme of either is reserved for the aristocracy.'

I said:—

'That the noble and the ignoble should coincide upon one point is a curious fact which I have not seen established elsewhere. They seem to lie at opposite poles.'

'They do, sir,' he replied. 'But they touch in their extremes. And it is precisely the extreme of the ignoble—in this particular department—which I am seeking to attain: that point, beyond which there is nothing more ignoble. And therefore I say, for the ignoblest deaths, the subject must be of noblest race and noblest mind. He cannot be too carefully chosen!'

'I mark and appreciate your Excellency's qualification,' said the doctor. 'I would suggest further, as regards the age of the subject, that he should be young. That seems appropriate.'

'There is doubtless something more outrageous, something more revolting to our sense of fitness and beauty, in the death of a young person than in that of one who has already taken his fill of years. Yet I venture to

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disagree with you. To my way of thinking, youth is invariably deficient in dignity and repose, two qualities—perhaps only extrinsic ones—that figure in our conception of what is truly noble. The full-blooded generosity of youth may shine in tragical situations, but it does not offer such an antithesis to the *ignoble* as the calm and almost sacred dignity of age, the violation of which is ignoble in a peculiar degree. No; I am disposed to think that the subject should be well stricken in years.'

'Let me add another restriction,' I said. 'The sufferer should be a woman. There is a pathos in the helplessness and the refinement of the sex—'

'By all means, sir. It should be a woman. We are approaching the climax, for it now only remains to decide upon the agency of her death, and the manner. It should, above all things, be as unnatural, as degrading, as possible, for the essence of the ignoble is that which debases the dignity of man, even as the tragic exalts it. . . . Our host is thoughtful. Well, Edmond, you are about to make a suggestion, I perceive?'

'Strangely enough,' he said, 'I could relate from my own experience a case that fulfils, I

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think, every one of the various conditions that you have deduced. In fact, if I may say so, it improves upon your ideal. I would call it the *dernier mot*.'

'The *dernier mot*!'

'Ah!'

'It concerns an old lady who lived, when I was still a boy, in a two-roomed cottage on this estate. She was popularly known as the Marquise, from the great airs she gave herself, but my mother told me that her correct name was *de la Marlinière*. She was of noble blood, but poor—poor as a rat, and a chronic sufferer from rheumatism. She lived alone with a large family of cats, in whose company she seemed to take the greatest pleasure—perhaps because they were the only remaining friends who would deign to share her lot, and not make her poverty a subject of reproach. Latterly, I understand, the Sisters of Charity lent her a half-witted little girl to attend on her during the long attacks of illness that nailed her to her couch. As to her character, everyone was agreed that she was gracious, amiable and *spirituelle*, and that she bore her bitter fate with composure. My mother took sincere pleasure in her company. She made pitiable efforts to disguise her poverty

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—nothing, I imagine, can be more distressing than poverty to a refined female mind—nothing more calculated to undermine the sense of dignity.'

'Very true,' we agreed.

'I have no doubt that, while my sainted mother yet lived, she was in fairly good circumstances, for her pride never disdained to accept help from a friend of her own sex and whom she considered as of her own standing. I well remember those periodical visits to the cottage and the impression of destitution they made upon me as a boy. Everything seemed small and mean—doubly so when I heard her discoursing in an affected language and of matters I did not understand. To revenge myself, I used to tease her cats. They sat about the room, sleek and mysterious, occupied with their own thoughts. She used to starve herself in order to feed them, and gave to each of them the name of some royal personage. That struck me, I remember, as peculiarly laughable.'

'Such cases are not rare,' observed the doctor.

'Common enough, I daresay. My mother told me never to laugh at her, but to respect her age and poverty. Sometimes she added that she was a distant connection of our family whose

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pride prevented her from appearing as such. That was presumably said to heighten my reverence, but it only made me laugh yet more. It struck me as a very ludicrous idea. And I am sorry to say that, after my mother's sudden death, the affairs of my poor relation went from bad to worse. She fell into the direst want—such want as we can scarcely believe to exist. She was clothed in rags and suffered terribly from cold. Often she had scarcely a crust of bread for dinner. And, in addition to her poverty, the torments of rheumatism increased, so that she spent many weeks in bed, unable to move a joint. I need hardly say that I only discovered all this when it was too late. For soon after my bereavement I left for Paris, and thence, as you know, for the East. I wrote from Paris to the Charity Sisters and to several ladies, interesting them on her behalf. But her pride did not simplify matters. She refused to accept aid, even indirectly, from myself. For the rest, these excellent ladies seem to have forgotten my recommendations very quickly. I am told that one of her last fancies was that she professed to be afraid of being robbed and murdered on account of her diamonds. It was sad and yet laughable. When I returned from my voyage she was already dead and buried. She had been found dead in her bed. The magistrate

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volunteered to repeat to me what he elicited from the little girl, who was the only witness of her death. It was in this fashion :—

*Now, Josephine, tell me the truth.*

Truth ?

*Tell me the exact manner of her death.*

Death ?

*You do not understand that word. Good. She was ill ?*

She lay in bed for two days with pains.

*She could not move ?*

No. Only her fingers a little. Like this . . .

*Had she something to eat ?*

There was bread beside her bed.

*Did you see it ?*

Yes, through the window.

*Had she water ?*

She often called for water.

*Why did you bring her no water ?*

I was afraid.

*Afraid of what ?*

Afraid to open the door.

*Why did you not open the door ?*

I do not know.

*What frightened you ?*

The cats. They were thirsty. It was a hot day. I was afraid.

*How many cats ?*

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Six and three little ones.

*And then ?*

*were* There ~~was~~ no more. But they sprang about.

*Why did you not break the window and let them out ?*

She forbade me to touch it. She feared the thieves.

*And then ?*

They began to eat. Marie Antoinette, the old tailless one, ate ~~the first~~ first. Then the others jumped up. Only the Dauphin, the little white one, did not eat.

*They ate much ?*

No, not much—that time.

*And then ?*

They sprang about more than before, and made a noise.

*What did you do ?*

I looked into the window and watched. It was near her head.

*What did she do ?*

She looked at me and cried out often.

*What did she say ?*

I do not know. She spoke differently.

*Why did you not open the door ?*

I was afraid.

*Why did you not fetch help ?*

Help ?



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*You do not understand. Good. Why did you not call the sisters ?*

I do not know.

*Why did you not call them ?*

I do not know. She disliked the sisters because they gave her food and laughed at her.

*When you watched the cats, what did you say to yourself ?*

I said : it is all as it should be (*ça doit être ainsi*).

*And then ?*

They were wild and she cried. There was blood.

*And then ?*

They ate again. That was about the hour of Ave Maria. After that she cried less.

*What did you do then ?*

I fetched my loaf and went into the kitchen to sleep.

*And then ?*

I went to sleep on my bench.

*And then ? In the morning ?*

I looked in at the window. I was frightened.

*And then ?*

I was frightened. I ran into the woods. . . .

‘That, Messieurs, is approximately what the obliging magistrate communicated to me.’

. . . . .

‘You spoke of the *dernier mot*,’ said the doctor.

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‘Now, let us suppose that, instead of one, there had been two of these poor old ladies, each equally helpless and suffering within sight of the other. The ignoble effect would clearly have been heightened. And so on, *ad infinitum*. Therefore, alas! it is not the *dernier mot*. Suppose there had been three, or four, or a hundred. . . .’

‘Insatiable monster!’

‘The Minister said:—

‘I think, Monsieur, that, from the point of view of the ignoble, the effect would not have been heightened. It seems to me that wherever we encounter intelligent spectators, even though they be fellow-sufferers, the tragic element intervenes. And where it intervenes, it dominates. For my part,’ he added in a whisper audible only to myself, ‘I consider that we have exhausted the discussion.’

He seemed to be suddenly preoccupied, for he stood up from his chair and raised his hand to his brow, as though he had remembered something.

‘Yes,’ I said aloud, ‘I think we have nearly reached the climax.’

‘Nearly,’ echoed the doctor in a somewhat dissatisfied tone. He was apparently still waiting for the *dernier mot*.

Our host summed up the discussion.

‘Evidently,’ he said, ‘there is in human nature

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an element that takes pleasure in contemplating—or, at least, in discoursing upon—the sufferings of our fellow-creatures and of animals. It is useless to deny the fact. The tiger ancestry, maybe. . . . Let us go on to the balcony and examine the sky.'

We rose at his suggestion and stepped out. It was bitterly cold. The thermometer had fallen to many degrees below the freezing point. The air was exhilarating and pure, and we walked up and down for a while in silence. § Another spirit had fallen upon us.

His Excellency appeared to be absorbed in meditation.

At last the doctor remarked to me:—

'In the plenitude of life, how glibly one talks of death! The sights that I have seen! The words that I, unwilling, have heard! I was present, my friend, on the field of Solferino! . . . '

But the Minister took his cousin aside and asked, in a low voice:—

'The lady of whom you spoke—was it by chance a Mademoiselle Hélène de la Marlinière?'

'That, I believe, was her full name.'

'She left Paris in the early thirties?'

'So I understand. My mother told me that she left it on account of her poverty and in order to escape the persecutions of her relations. She hid

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herself so well that they never discovered her whereabouts, and this little triumph gave her pleasure. They had treated her as little short of a disgrace to themselves. It is infamous.'

'Ah! Because she refused to marry a gentleman called Vilbort?'

'I have heard something to that effect. I see you are acquainted with the matter. Perhaps in your official capacity?' . . .

'My God! She was the only sister of my grandfather.' . . .

. . . . .

We looked out into the night. The park, with its solemn avenues, lay at our feet embedded in snow. Beyond, stretched a vast expanse of undulating forest country. The young moon had already gone to rest, but the snow, between the sombre patches of shadow, glittered tremulously with the reflected scintillations of a myriad stars. There was a stillness in the atmosphere that promised good sport for the morrow.

## A Tyrrhenian Fable

ONCE upon a time there lived, in the country of Atlantis, a king and his queen. The king was just and pious, but his name has been forgotten ; the queen, who was unjust and overbearing, was called Selona. In due time a daughter was born to them. At this event there were great feastings in all the towns, and the neighbouring princes sent gifts and messages of congratulation, but the queen was secretly angry, for she had wished to herself a son instead of a daughter.

The little princess was named Mytho. She was the perfection of loveliness. Her eyes were blue—not of the dim glaucous blue of northern skies, but deep and glowing ; serene in their depths, like a rift of the azure firmament walled in between two heavy thunderclouds, and of more dazzling glow than the legions of tiny gentians that carpet moist mountain meadows in springtime. And whenever she turned to speak there was a world of tenderness in her look.

Now, because all Mytho's nation and kinsfolk were of dark eyes and complexion, the king was

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alarmed. Such a thing had never been seen before and he wondered what the prodigy could mean. So he consulted, in the first place, the astrologers and the great teachers of medicine, and those skilled in the knowledge of herbs.

They opened their books, but soon shut them again in despair. Then he called together the Ministers of the land, who talked and wrangled together for many days. At last, when it seemed least likely that they should ever come to a decision, the voice of the oldest of them prevailed, and he thus addressed the king :—

‘Know, O king, that this is no child like others. She is destined, methinks, to a strange fate. Let her be brought up apart from her kindred, and do not oppose her will, for she can do no wrong action. And look you govern your people wisely, exercising justice in all your dealings, else evil will come upon your dominions. . . . I can call to mind that my father told me of some prophecy anent a blue-eyed maiden, but I paid little heed to his words. Young folks are ever forgetful! All this was long ago, in the days when there was less wrong-doing and when everyone was more wise and happy than they are nowadays.’

Some of the younger counsellors were seen to turn away their faces, as though they would hide a smile ; but the king gave heed to these words.

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And thus it came about that Mytho, while she was yet a little child, was taken away from the great town and grew up in a palace that was specially built for her among the wild woods. She used to wander alone among the trees, and often played with the wild fawns of the forest, or crept along the streamlets to espy the painted kingfisher darting down the current swift as an arrow of light, or poised, like a quivering flame, over the still pools. The days glided by as in the borderland between sleep and waking; the musings of her gentle mind were clad in rainbow hues. And the gods looked down from their cloudy pavilions and smiled, and took joy in her beauty and innocence.

Because she longed for a playmate they sent their favourite, the young huntsman Alphis, to be her companion. Mytho and Alphis became the dearest of friends to one another, and between them was such harmony and understanding as never falls to our lot. And so the golden months passed.

But after these years of happiness Queen Selona recalled her daughter to her own palace and said :—

‘It is now time, Mytho, that you should think of your marriage. I will ask the courtiers and nobles of the kingdom to come here in order that you may choose one among them and be happy.’

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But when she heard these words the princess wept and answered,—

‘O my mother, I have been brought up far away from all these strangers. And I was happy with Alphis and have promised to be ever true to him.’

Asked the queen :—

‘Who is Alphis?’

When all had been explained to her she was very angry. But she determined to conceal it, for fear of the king, who loved his daughter. So she bit her lips and merely said :—

‘Try to chase him from your remembrance.’

Before that day Mytho had never known what it was to feel disappointment. She was surprised at these hard words, and the more she thought of them, the more cruel they seemed, till at last she became quite ill with sadness.

So the queen, in her perplexity, applied to the king for advice, explaining to him her projects and Mytho’s resistance to them, and hoping to make him think as she did. But he only shook his head and replied :—

‘I can do nothing. Such and such is the rede of my counsellors, and we would do well to follow it.’

Whereupon Queen Selona waxed yet more angry, for she hated to be crossed in her wishes. And she bethought her of other shifts. She summoned to the palace the witch Oluxo, that



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lived far away in a hollow mountain, a master of enchantments. Such was Oluxo's might that she could drain rivers to their sources, and transform men into beasts, and coax the very elements into obedience. The evil hag laid back the journey of three moons in the twinkling of an eye and stood before Selona, who told her all that had happened, and concluded by saying :—

‘Change me, therefore, the heart of this girl and mould it to my wishes, that she may forget this vagrant Alphis.’

But Oluxo, mighty as she was, winced at these words.

‘Alas, O queen,’ she replied, ‘it is beyond my art to turn the intent of a maiden's heart. Her desires are inviolable and may not be thwarted by spells. Command to me, therefore, some other behest.’

Selona considered awhile and then said :—

‘We must rid the earth of this lover.’

‘Nothing is easier,’ laughed Oluxo. Such a terrible laugh !

And so, after the heat of the day, when Alphis was resting near a favourite spring of water, he was suddenly changed into the likeness of a fawn—such a fawn as Mytho had played with in the woods—and a black panther, who came to the same place to slake his thirst, fell upon him and devoured him. Thus Alphis died, unbeknown to his beloved.

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But in the palace, meanwhile, Mytho could not escape from the attentions of her suitors. The fame of her blue eyes had spread over the whole land, and they all said among themselves :—

‘She is indeed beautiful.’

So that the nobles flocked to the capital from the furthest outskirts of the country, seeking her favour. And the queen urged her to accept one of them without delay, for she feared the king might come to hear of her machinations.

But Mytho remained true to her friend and left her father’s palace in the hopes of meeting him once more.

She wandered far away. But the suitors followed her everywhere, quarrelling with one another as to who should be her husband, and each striving that she should notice only himself. And one evening as she lay down to rest, footsore and sick at heart, the witch Oluxo suddenly stood up before her. Her eyes gleamed with wicked pleasure at the sight of Mytho’s humiliation, and she said :—

‘Wretched girl, see to what straits you have come through disobedience. You are now at the farthest end of your father’s country. Therefore take one of these to your husband or I will never more let you return home.’

But the princess remembered her vow.

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To the nobles, who pressed her to help them, the witch said:—

‘I cannot alter the bent of her mind. It is for you to do this, if you can. But do you persevere and I will pray to my great master that he preserve your lives in this pursuit. More I cannot do for you.’

So Mytho rose up again and wandered on and came to strange regions: to the land of the troglodytes that live in dark caves and subsist on roots and noisome reptiles; to the dwarfs, cunning and treacherous; to the anthropophagi, that devour men’s flesh. All these, and many more, were under Oluxo’s sway. Whenever, therefore, Mytho prayed them for help, they said:—

‘We will not aid you—leave us.’

And her loveliness was gone. The colour left her cheeks for excess of ill-treatment.

At last she reached a little rock-islet jutting out of the waves. Now this rock belonged to a good fairy who loved to dive among the crimson groves of coral at its foot and then to mount, with streaming hair, up to its breezy summit, where she took her pleasure in watching the clouds as they drifted into dainty shapes overhead.

Mytho thought herself safe on this islet and all her hardships ended. But scarcely had she set foot on it than the suitors climbed up likewise and

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surrounded her, each praising his own merits and disparaging the other.

‘By the light of her eyes,’ said the most pretentious of them, ‘I was the first to follow her to this spot, and she is now mine for ever.’ But the others only mocked at him and they set to quarrelling more than ever.

When Mytho saw all this her heart failed her. Turning her blue eyes full upon them, she cried out in despair :—

‘There is indeed no release for me save in death ! I will therefore put you to the task. Let him who loves me follow me.’

With these words she threw herself down headlong from the cliff.

The nobles stood aghast. But they were much too cowardly to think of doing likewise. They at once began to wrangle among themselves about who was to blame and how they should escape out of these straits.

But the good fairy lifted her white arms and said :—

‘You shall never more quit this islet to see your homes. And because a mighty charm preserves you from death I shall chain you living to this rock, where you shall crawl eternally, and your blue colour shall proclaim, to such as have understanding, the tale of Mytho and her eyes.’

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And they felt their bodies shrinking under a sleek and scaly armour. Their faces became pointed like lizards' snouts, their limbs squat, and each of them laughed, thinking his fellow smaller and uglier than himself.

'Ha! ha! How ugly you are!' they said to one another. For they were transmewed, one and all, into sky-blue lizards. They immediately began to dispute about such things as may interest a reptile community, and their contentious voices and habits are remarked to this day. Many travellers have visited the rock in order to see these wonderful lizards. But not everyone knows how they reached that islet or came by their strange colour.

The fairy sought and found a new rock on which to disport herself in peace.

Meanwhile, the kingdom of Atlantis was invaded by enemies and suffered great defeats because the chief nobles were away and could not defend it. And this was a right punishment for the unkindness of the queen towards her daughter.

But Mytho, after her fateful plunge from the rock, and before her delicate feet could touch the crest of the waves, was upborne by a silvery mist in the semblance of a white sea-mew, that disspread its wings and flew away with her to meet Alphis on some happy star.

## The Case of Mrs Hillier

MANY years ago the exigencies of business compelled me to reside for several months at the town of Landau in the Bavarian Palatinate.

I found it a peculiarly dull spot, especially in the winter months. Later, when the leaves are green, there are some pleasant excursions to be made into the wooded mountains. A chain of red sandstone hills forms the backbone of the country, and nearly every point of eminence is crowned by the ruins of a castle. Stupendous works they are, some of them. They are all grim records of the Feudal Ages, when a human life was of little account and men were sent in gangs, groaning and toiling, with the lash at their backs, to carve the face of the cliff or to hew dark passages into the solid rock, till they dropped dead from fatigue. There is proud Madenburg, laid low by the French, whose iron bullets are still fixed in the walls; Trifels, where Richard Cœur-de-Lion, they say, languished until his romantic rescue by Blondel;

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frowning Fleckenstein, celebrated of old in the pages of the *Nibelungenlied*; Weglenburg, Dahn—in fact, a region full of knights and dragons and enchantments. The grey mists of the Middle Ages still float about those decayed, pine-girdled fastnesses.

After some weeks of loneliness I became acquainted with a Mr and Mrs Hillier, who were, so far as I know, the only English residents in Landau at that time. The acquaintance quickly ripened into friendship. Mr Hillier had been for some twenty years Professor of Physiology and Comparative Anatomy at the University of New Leeds, U.S. He was now well advanced in years. Mrs Hillier was a fair lady, wreathed in smiles, and somewhat younger and stouter than her husband. They had apparently settled down to spend the remainder of their lives in Landau, though I soon found out that it was the lady, and not her husband, who had selected this dreary spot. Mr Hillier, indeed, seemed to dislike it particularly. They were fairly wealthy people, and I was for a long time puzzled to explain this curious affection on Mrs Hillier's part for an obscure German town. A mere accident led to the solution of this mystery.

I was sitting one evening alone with Mr

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Hillier and turning over the pages of a large volume that had just arrived by post. It was entitled *A Monograph of the Boa Family*, and bore on its title-page the written inscription:—

‘To his former teacher, Professor Hillier, in token of friendship and respect. A. Bellwood.’

The professor corroborated the fact:—

‘A former pupil of mine. A great enthusiast for serpents. He spent many years in the swamps of South America.’

‘These American scientific publications are luxuries,’ I said, glancing over the pages.

The book was open at a magnificent plate representing a black boa-constrictor, whose extenuated lungs seemed to heave with life-like motion, while iridescent tints played about the dusky coils. It was a masterpiece of the engraver’s art. One expected every minute to see the shining monster wake into life and glide out of the pictured page. I glanced at the accompanying text. It ran, with pardonable pride:—

‘This new subspecies of anaconda, for which I venture to propose the name of *Eunectes murinus* var. *tartareus*, was obtained by me in a single specimen (a male) in the marshy forests bordering upon the Upper Brancos River. Nothing can surpass the beauty of its rainbow hues, which only I



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have hitherto been in a position to appreciate. Unfortunately, the marvellous tints fade rapidly after death.' Then followed measurements and other details.

'I have never seen a black anaconda,' I remarked.

'I have,' replied Mr Hillier.

'Then Mr Bellwood is mistaken?'

Mrs Hillier at that moment entered the room behind me. She glanced over my shoulder at the engraving, and then, to my amazement, uttered a scream of terror and fainted into the arms of her husband, who had hastily risen from his chair.

'My dearest Alice!' he cried in consternation, supporting her, as best he could, out of the room. Presently he returned alone.

'I must apologise,' he said. 'The fact is, my wife cannot endure snakes.'

On that evening he volunteered no further information, but during the course of my stay at Landau I elicited from him a story that offers an adequate explanation of Mrs Hillier's indisposition. This is what he told me:—

'I studied at the renowned University of Dublin. In those days—that was forty years ago—I worked hard, for I had my ambitions. My ambition was to become a great doctor, a benefactor to mankind. I have relapsed, as you

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perceive, into mediocrity. That is the end of many a promising career.

‘It was not long before I made the inevitable discovery that, owing to the vastness and complexity of subjects, I would be compelled to devote myself as a specialist to one branch or another if I intended to do work of any value. After some deliberation, therefore, I decided to take up the Respiratory Organs as a particular subject. This, I thought, would soonest bring me into prominence, especially in England, where there is such an appalling mortality from pulmonary complaints.

‘During my preliminary researches I found nothing so interesting as the lungs of snakes. One can picture to oneself, from the form of a snake, what singularly-shaped organs its lungs must be, and under what unusual conditions of compression and simultaneous elongation the work of breathing proceeds. Besides, it is precisely in this class of animals that one meets with some of those curious transitional forms—the Boa family, for instance—where two lungs are gradually converted into the single organ of most snakes, generally by the reduction of the left lobe. But these are technicalities.

‘A difficulty arose at the outset of my studies. St Patrick having banished all snakes from Ireland, I was put to considerable trouble and expense in

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sending for material for my daily work of dissection from London, Hamburg and other places. I required large specimens, boa-constrictors and other giants, for the smaller individuals did not allow me to carry on with sufficient clearness those minute histological investigations into the lining of delicate blood-vessels and so forth—especially with the microscopes of those days. In this dilemma a fellow-student supplied me with a letter of introduction to a Mr Denbigh, a retired naturalist, with whom he used to have dealings some years ago.

*Morris by name*

‘I found this man’s house with some little difficulty. It lay near the end of Wilcox Street, at the outskirts of one of the dirtiest quarters of the town. It was a large, old-fashioned building with a patch of grass in front. The door was opened by a young girl, whom I afterwards discovered to be Miss Leonora Moore, an orphan, and Mr Denbigh’s niece. She lived alone with her uncle. She was slim, with a plaintive and ethereal expression of countenance that accorded well with her somewhat romantic name. She glanced through my friend’s letter and said:—

“I cannot ask you to speak to Mr Denbigh at this moment. But perhaps you would care to see some of the larger serpents—Mr Morris writes that you are interested in them.”

‘We ascended some stairs and entered a room

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that was stiflingly hot. Along the walls I observed a number of cages containing tropical reptiles. Opposite to that of a large Labaria snake from Guiana a man was sitting motionless. It was Mr Denbigh. He was about sixty years of age, sallow, clean-shaven and dressed in a tight-fitting suit of black material. He made no signs of having heard us. The reptile's head was slightly raised, and Mr Denbigh appeared to be looking fixedly into its eye. I laid my letter of recommendation upon a writing-table at his elbow.

"It is useless to interrupt him now," my companion whispered. "He is often like this, nowadays. He has changed so much lately. It is horrible—horrible," she added in a yet lower tone. She was evidently not happy in the company of this old man and his strange pets.

'Descending from this room by another staircase we found ourselves on the lower floor again. This portion of it had been laid out into cages for some ten or twelve tropical serpents. I ought to have said *boudoirs*, for that alone gives some idea of the luxurious furniture of these apartments, that contrasted singularly with the impoverished appearance of Mr Denbigh and his niece. I learned, long afterwards, that recently, on being appointed her guardian, he had appropriated all her wealth, which was considerable, and em-

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ployed it in buying new serpents from time to time and in fitting up the rooms. We wandered from one to the other of them, and I was lost in admiration over their inmates—an admiration that Miss Moore did not seem to share.

“Horrible!” she repeated. “And I have to attend to these awful creatures, and to feed them at fixed hours, and to report on their health. My uncle seldom climbs the stairs on account of his heart. He is so different from what he used to be. He threatens to lock me up with them if I disobey. . . .”

“He seems to be a tyrant.”

“Two days ago a python died and I thought he would have killed me in his rage. Fortunately it was not one of his favourites, on account of its irregular markings. Can you understand that? If Zephro were to die he would murder me outright.”

“Zephro?” I asked.

‘She pointed to a door, closed with a large padlock.

“That is where he keeps Zephro,” she explained. “It has not had any food for two months. He pretends to worship it as a kind of holy creature. I never know what he will do from one day to the next. He changes continually.”

‘I entered Mr Denbigh’s room alone and saw him walking about excitedly. His face was

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flushed, so far as his pale complexion would allow, as after an abundant meal. He was talking to himself and seemed to be in excellent humour. His was a strange physiognomy—it reminded me of something, I knew not what.

“I have read Mr Morris’s letter,” he began, “and am delighted to welcome you. Hardly anyone comes to see me nowadays. So you are studying anatomy? I have put aside some preparations out of my museum for you to take home and study at your ease. May they be to you the stepping-stones to other knowledge—greater knowledge. I have passed that stage long ago. Wonderful man—Braid!”

‘I was barely acquainted with the name, for that was at a time when the hypnotic experiments of James Braid were quite new to the scientific world. He continued:—

“I possess a fountain, Mr Hillier, whence proceeds joy more delicious than wine. Have you never lost yourself in a fixed gaze?—have you never floated away into another existence, drunk copious wonder-draughts of wisdom?”

‘He seemed to be bursting with some secret pleasure.

“You have some magnificent live serpents downstairs, Mr Denbigh.”

“So I have,” he replied, somewhat surprised. I

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found out afterwards that he was never aware of my acquaintance with his niece. "Only one of them, however, is perfect. And before you pay your respects to Zephro, Mr Hillier, I should like to say a few words to prepare you for the mysteries of which he is the living symbol."

'He spoke earnestly. His voice habitually never rose above a cold, sibilant whisper, and his eyes remained fixed upon me. They were long slit and glassy, without any expression, and sunk under deep bony brows. He said :—

"The sun wanders from East to West. Towns and villages spread from East to West. Civilisation progresses from East to West. The East is the old—the West the new. We look to the West for better things. Zephro, needless to say, comes from the furthest West."

'I nodded in acquiescence.

"A word as to markings. In Miocene times, you are aware, the fauna was more striped than nowadays. Stripes are dying out, as you can observe in the colour-development of many animals between the immature and the adult stages. They break up into bars, then spots, and these coalesce to form an eye-pattern, a ring. The ocellus is the purest form of ornamentation, even as the circle is the purest line. As a naturalist you have doubtless been astonished at the fact that many varieties of Ophidians, Saurians.

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and Batrachians—widely-separated groups of animals—are striped in the East and become ocellated towards the West. My explanation of this hitherto mysterious phenomenon is very simple. The ocellus represents the eye. And it is the eye, as Braid has shown, whence can be drawn new thoughts, new truths, new life. Zephro, needless to say, displays the highest form of decorative design. Now let us descend.”

‘As he opened the padlock of the door I found myself looking through a crystal pane into another serpent boudoir, larger and more extravagantly furnished than the others. The first object that attracted my attention was an enormous black boa-constrictor that wound itself in mighty convolutions about a moderately-sized skeleton tree in the centre of the room. It was the same anaconda—the *Eunectes murinus* var. *tartareus*—of which Mr Bellwood has given a description. I saw at a glance that everything possible had been done to assure its health and happiness. Every interstice in the room, except the proper ventilators, had been carefully closed with cotton wool as a protection from draughts. The room was panelled up to a man’s height with polished rose-wood; above that, the walls and the vaulted ceiling had been painted *al fresco* to resemble a primeval forest—a delicate attention!—with dark green



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foliage and gaudy birds fluttering among the branches. At one corner a rivulet of tepid water trickled out of a dolphin's mouth, and, breaking in miniature cascades down some terraces paved in Moorish fashion with golden and green mosaics, lost itself at the foot of the tree in a clear round pool. A fine specimen of *Victoria regia* slumbered upon its surface. The light fell through double windows (an additional precaution), the inner ones, being split up into small panes of roseate tint, produced bright patches of colour, that lay tremulously, like shreds of crimson lace, upon the white marble floor. Here and there were costly silken mats of Oriental workmanship. A small silver thermometer marked the temperature, and the heating apparatus of the chamber, situated beneath the floor, could be regulated to a nicety from where I stood by means of a simple screw.

‘Whilst I was contemplating this bizarre establishment, the black monster lazily uncoiled itself and glided into the water. It gave me the impression of relentless ferocity. But there could be no two opinions as to its beauty. The smooth jet-black skin shone with a lively play of colours, and a series of exquisite ocelli, with emerald centre-piece framed in a ring of cobalt blue, ran down its back in wonderful regularity of design. They appeared to dilate and contract with its heaving

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breath. Round its neck I observed a necklace of beads of rock-crystal, or moonstone, set in gold.

“A wonderful specimen,” I said. “And you have done your best to make him feel at home. Might I inquire as to the object of that collar?”

“The necklace? A harmless deceit on my part. He thinks it is for ornament, but it is really only a device for accustoming him to abstinence. I consider it beneath his dignity, as a god, to swallow animals alive. He should partake only of manna and ambrosia! Of course this cannot be done all at once. Such little *ruses* are quite permissible—all human beings practise them upon the objects of their worship.”

“He must be nearly thirty feet long,” I said. “I daresay he could swallow a man. At least, there are authenticated instances of these serpents swallowing what was twice as thick as their own heads—thanks to the accommodating capacity of their jawbones.”

“Ah! Really? Do you really think he could do so? I have often wondered about this. Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps he would not disdain to accept a pure offering, perhaps he ought to wrestle with some warm-blooded victim in order that he might rejoice, like a god, in his strength!” He seemed to entertain my idea quite seriously.

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“He looks ferocious.”

“His rage, Mr Hillier, is even as the all-devouring rage of the sun. His silence symbolises the stillness of the stars. His convolutions—the winding ways of the planets. His temperature—the coldness of the moon. His iridescent flashes—the rainbow, that displays the spectral hues of all things. His blackness—primordial slime and chaos. His protracted length—the distance from untruth to truth. Behold yourself, Mr Hillier, at the threshold of the mysteries.”

‘I began to understand Miss Moore’s apprehensions. . . .

‘After this visit I only met Mr Denbigh once again. The immediate cause of my coming was to obtain some more material for my studies, but I have often marvelled at the strange fate that caused me to select that particular day. It was the 10th of November.

‘An old serving-woman answered the bell. I found Mr Denbigh sitting alone. He was surrounded by books, and I observed, with surprise, the necklace of the black boa-constrictor lying upon the table at his elbow. He soon led me into another room, the walls of which were lined with cupboards containing innumerable reptiles preserved in spirits.

“This,” he explained, “is my museum—

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mausoleum, I should say—where my favourites sleep after death. The Egyptians must have felt the same kind of reverence for their dead as I do. Ah, those Egyptians! . . . On that shelf, Mr Hillier, you will find an exhaustive series of preparations illustrating the diseases of serpents. I imagine it is unique in the world. Come and study it whenever you like—perhaps it will be of use to you in your pulmonary investigations. But I trust you will soon grow out of that stage. I also used to take pleasure in dissecting lymph-glands and what not. I have done what is called good work; a brilliant career lay before me. But I realised its futility and chose the thorny path of poverty. Providence, lately, has thrown some money in my lap as the reward, I suppose, of my honest purpose.” And his frozen features melted into the semblance of a smile. But it was a strange smile—a stony smile. The corners of his mouth were drawn up into an expression of hard mockery, such as one may see in the faces of many snakes. Yes, that was the secret of his countenance—its resemblance to the snake-type, a resemblance further accentuated by the toneless, hissing voice. Long contact with reptiles had presumably modified his physiognomy.

“You have given your specimens wonderfully life-like poses,” I said admiringly.

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“I perceive you agree with Hogarth as to the beauty of serpentine lines. . . . That was an excellent suggestion you made the other day!”

“What suggestion?” I asked, wondering to what he could refer.

“You have forgotten? . . . Yes, I confess I have taken a great deal of trouble with this collection. I used to dissect serpents, but nowadays I find it hard to cut up my favourites with a knife. It seems a kind of outrage upon the dead—any true lover of snakes will understand! I also dealt in reptiles formerly, but I found it increasingly difficult to part with them. I am an old man; all my friends have either died or deserted me, and thus I am thrown upon the affection of dumb animals. That, at least, is how my love for them began. Nowadays, understanding them as I do, I spare myself nothing in order to gratify their tastes. I try to anticipate their smallest desires. The Egyptians knew why they paid reverence to these creatures—the Orientals, the Mexicans, and all the other enlightened nations of the world — they knew!”

“Are your hypnotic studies progressing?” I asked.

“Better, far better, than I ever dreamed!”

‘Whatever I may have thought of some of Mr

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Denbigh's theories, he was evidently an original thinker and a practical worker in some departments. He had anticipated by many years the discovery of certain laws of animal coloration, and he must have studied profoundly the art—an art that has since been completely revolutionised—of preparing life-like specimens in alcohol. He was a pioneer in this field. His collection was a revelation to me. The museum specimens of those days were brown, shrunken mummies; leathery, shrivelled through the action of spirits, and devoid of all semblance to their former state. Mr Denbigh's preparations were rounded and plastic and bright in the coloration. The most delicate internal organs were preserved in life-like condition, and even the tenderest tints—those evanescent blues and reds—were retained in their intensity, presumably by means of a hypodermic injection of some preservative fluid known only to himself. . . .

‘Was it a fact? Or was it imagination—a part of that same Design that had led me here on this day? I seemed to hear, in the direction of the cages downstairs, the sound of a low human moan. A terrible suspicion flashed across my mind and I ran down the stairs, regardless of Mr Denbigh's entreaties.

‘The door of Zephro's apartment was ajar and

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I saw Miss Moore standing calmly, open-eyed, in that chamber of death. She was in a state of trance. The reptile lay partly in the water that magnified its huge dimensions; its tail, appearing above the surface, lashed angrily to and fro. I lost no time in dragging her out of a danger that a harmless remark of mine had prepared for her, and she told me later that this moment of awakening, when she realised her position, was worse than all the conceivable torments of hell. I can well believe it.

‘Mr Denbigh himself had followed me hastily. He fell down at the door of the cage. We thought he had fainted, but he was afterwards discovered to be stone dead. The emotion, combined with the ravages of a long-standing cardiac disease, had been too much for him.

‘And since that day,’ Professor Hillier added, ‘my wife naturally objects to the sight of snakes. That is why she has at last persuaded me to settle down here at Landau, because it is one of the few parts of Europe that are absolutely free from them.’

‘Your wife . . . ?’

‘You did not guess? I call her by her second name now—the other one reminds her too much of that awful period.’

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‘But,’ I objected, ‘I saw a snake only the other day, near Lindelbronn.’

An unmistakable thrill of delight passed over the professor’s features.

‘Is it possible? That is too good to be true! I have never heard of such a thing.’

I said :—

‘It was about a yard in length and of a reddish colour.’

‘Ah, the *coronella lævis*, a very harmless species. If you are prepared, Mr R——, to assure Mrs Hillier of that fact, you will make me your debtor for life. It is useless for me to tell her—she knows how I dislike this place,’ he added, elliptically.

I gladly volunteered, and we passed into the drawing-room.

‘Alice,’ said her husband, with an air of concern and gravity, ‘Mr R—— has some information which, I am sorry to say, will not be very agreeable to you. The text-books are wrong. It is the old story. One writer makes a mistake and all the others copy from him.’

I controlled my features and told my story. Mrs Hillier seemed to take the news very calmly. But within a week the establishment was broken up and I was once more alone in Landau.



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GAUDIUM. Otio fruor iucundissimo.

RATIO. Utor dic. . . .

PETRARCA—*De remediis utriusque Fortunae.*

THE mansion of the late Duke was noteworthy in more than one respect. It stood at a great altitude, many leagues from the nearest farmstead, in one of the wildest districts of his wild domain, and upon a natural platform at the head of a tortuous glen that led up into the solitary recesses of the mountains. His father had originally selected the site in a moment of caprice to build a summer hunting lodge for certain of his friends who were fond of the chase; but his mother, the Lady Mathilda, a discerning woman, loved its seclusion at all seasons, and had spent the latter part of her married life there alone with her infant. For her husband, I presume, found it every year more difficult to tear himself away from the pleasures and intrigues of the capital.

It was in the month of February, I remember, that I made my first acquaintance with the place.

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The mock death, the immobility of winter, was yet upon all living things. The sledge in which I lay half torpid had been winding for many hours between high-piled snowdrifts up the sinuosities of the ice-bound glen. Towards evening we encountered a bank of fog that seemed interminable. But suddenly, as we attained the plateau and came close under the grey walls, we emerged out of the mists and passed into an atmosphere of intensest sparkling blue. I found it difficult at first to inhale the clear air. The optical effect was marvellous. We were standing, as it seemed, aloof from the world, upon some high-poised cloud, and surveying a billowy ocean of vapour. Nothing in all this heaving expanse attracted the eye, save where some mountain-peak soared, island-like, into the æther above the tawny flood and reflected on its snows the crimson rays of sunset. Though the spell was only momentary, I have never been able to dismiss the notion that I then entered upon something more than mere terrestrial isolation.

The winter at this altitude was sublime. But the most enjoyable season was the great summer calm, when the fountains were released and the moist precipices glistened with a thousand silvery threads of water; when one might lie dreaming for hours upon some dry knoll, amid that indefinable

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but overpowering fragrance of wild nature, listening to the hum of insects, the music of the waters, or the harsh cries of kite or curlew or fern-owl. For never a sound of humanity reached the mansion.

The Lady Mathilda would often gaze from her window over the wide tableland, glowing in russet and mauve tints, and her eye unconsciously followed the meanderings of the rill, that burst from a chill cleft near the mansion, as it leaped in busy cataracts between the brown boulders, and finally, after a descent of more than three thousand feet, lost itself in the belt of forest where flowed the great river. All around was silence and solitude. At this serene height the landscape was outspread before her like a map, and her glance often rested where, in the dim distance far below, some glittering spire, rising among the purple haze of a village, reminded her of the existence of her fellow-creatures in that world, so far away, that she once knew so well. And every evening there appeared in the sky such flashes of colours, such lustrous cloud-configurations as would have gladdened the heart of a Turner or Claude Lorraine. Sometimes the firmament was alive with hosts of ruddy demons that advanced with flying banners and all the pomp of arms towards some mimic citadel—then suddenly the gorgeous pageantry would fade away, and pale, distressful

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phantoms stretched arms from east to west; anon appeared a golden harvest swaying to the breeze, or high-piled terraces browsed by flocks of sheep, or curious portraiture of crosses and spears. Thus gazing, she learned to sympathise with those simpler minds of other days that were pleased to discover, in these sky pictures, portents of deep significance to themselves.

A lonely spot indeed, but it suited the purpose of the Lady Mathilda. Her sensitive mind recoiled at the prospect that her son should imbibe (like his father) the brutality that is often enough the result of a purely worldly education, however praiseworthy its objects and admirable its general results; her own unfortunate experiences, therefore, had counselled her to bring up the child at her side in this isolation, until such a time, at least, as he should be sufficiently wise to repel those evil influences and passions to which his father had succumbed.

I have never been able to fathom the reasons of her marriage. She must have known something of her future husband's character and reputation. Her own birth had placed her above the temptation of social ambition. Nor can ignorance be pleaded on her behalf, for she was over thirty at the time of her marriage, and a woman of the world in every sense of that word.

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I can therefore only attribute this step to one of those ill-starred whims that sometimes afflict the most reasonable of her sex. It was soon seen that hers was a nature whose full beauty only blossoms in the wintry storm of adversity. But it is unnecessary to rake up any of these ancient scandals whose influence upon her was such that, before the timely birth of her son, her friends often feared that her mind would give way under the strain. After the death of her husband she resumed her inward harmony and laid aside, with antique dignity, all memory of the past. She was now freed from a life of continual apprehensions and reproaches. Her self-divided existence had ended, and here, in the solitudes of the mountains, her true nature again *found itself*.

three L

The mellow, the morose, the frivolous: these are the ~~true~~ categories into one of which, when the plasticity of youth has passed away, the human character tends to fall. The Lady Mathilda belonged to the first-named, and it is this class who enjoy one priceless privilege to which youth can never aspire—the perfect *humour*, true to itself, tempered and refined by affliction. It is their prerogative to smile when youth weeps; to be not embittered, but enlightened; not indifferent, but resigned. The Lady Mathilda had possessed throughout life something of that co-ordinating and

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systematic spirit of great thinkers like Humboldt and Linnæus: she had never learned to detach the part from the whole. But her formerly materialistic views had undergone a transformation, and they were now chastened and suffused by a roseate tinge of poetry. She began to see through the dull body into the living soul of things. She had lived long enough to survey herself, and all human affairs, in their true perspective; to comprehend their utter insignificance in the great plan of macrocosm. Above all, she had suffered, and that fiery ordeal had not been undergone without a corresponding gain of moral purification—a permanent addition to her sum of knowledge.

All those who have endured real grief of heart have learned to know the value—the appalling, stupefying *non-value*—of the comforts of philosophy and the promises of religion.

This, then, was a definite acquisition of wisdom. And therefore, like others who have travelled by that same road of grief and enlightenment, she now took refuge in such literature and thoughts as removed her from those purely human interests, that had been the burden of her latter life, into the dim and airy regions of the superhuman. For while we can never hope to escape wholly out of our own human atmosphere, or even wish to do so, it remains a suggestive fact that some great thinkers

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are not for ever satisfied with the actions and passions of the purely human. Nor yet with those of beings purely divine, as they labour under analogous disadvantages, being inevitably endowed with ideas of good and evil akin to our own, only somewhat caricatured in intensity. The purely divine therefore is, and ever has been, profoundly uninteresting. I should hence have better said: the *extra-human*, for it is precisely in this admixture of the fanciful, in this ~~interpretation~~ *penetration* of human motives with a new and unaccountable element that thinkers, congenial to herself, have delighted; and I have referred at some length to this tendency in the mind of the Lady Mathilda in the hope of throwing light upon certain much-abused peculiarities of her son, that are intelligible only when traced back to this source. But let me at once confess my candid opinion that, amiable and interesting as he was, nothing but the accident of his birth and the innate snobbishness of his fellow-creatures can explain that phenomenal outpouring of idle and mischievous gossip on the occasion of his death.

She used to exemplify her views by referring to that universal love of the fabulous that underlies the popular tales of all nations and has doubtless some deep meaning. Did not the illustrious Goethe experience, in his old age, a kindred longing—a longing after the extra-human—when

he wrote his *Faust*? That Olympic genius that had delved so deep into the tortuous caverns of the human soul had now become weary of mankind in their ordinary manifestations. He craved for other company. And no one has taken such sympathetic delight in the extra-natural as our Shakespeare. He was clearly animated by that selfsame longing when he traced, in the last effluence of his divine inspiration, the delicately-ethereal framework of the *Tempest*, and breathed into it that atmosphere of witchery and new images. New images, new springs of action—he had played enough upon the human pipe! These demi-gods among men, that had spent their lives in conning the book of humanity, in gauging the lusts and hatreds of their fellows, in arranging and rearranging the puppets upon this stage of ours—these master-minds were grown tired of their pastime. The truth, foreshadowed in the child's love of fairy tales, is borne out by the matured wisdom of sages! New beings, new secrets: enough of man!

She would say—and her son interpreted it later after his own extravagant fashion—that whoever deals much with mankind must yearn to build up a world of fancy for himself; to escape from their sordid lives and interests, their wearisome virtues, their self-praise, ceaseless as the cicada's song; to



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be in touch with other thoughts and passions, with something new, something different. Humanity leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

The child, meanwhile, grew up in this calm wilderness, hardy and supple in body, in mind wholly lovable like herself. He possessed that anthropomorphism characteristic of all solitary children, and I often amused myself in endeavouring to penetrate into the tangled system of Nature-worship that he had built up for himself. But the recesses of a child's mind are inaccessible as that Hercynian forest of old.

I saw a good deal of the family in that memorable winter, when the whole country was convulsed in rebellions whose thunders reverberated up to the very walls of the grey mansion among the clouds. § Within, all was peace.

During those long evenings when the beechen logs flickered on the hearth, the Lady Mathilda revealed herself to me, for the first time, in the character of a fire-worshipper—a cult congenial to her temper; a fire-worshipper, not in the strict Zoroastrian sense of the word, nor yet in the sense of an artist who merely delights in the transcendent beauty of the flames that surpass, in purity

and lustre, every gem of the earth as they climb upwards in gay motion, clustering brightly on some devoted spot, and liberating, with mirthful sound, the prisoned life within ; but in a profound and yet romantic sense of the word. Gazing steadily into the fire in a kind of trance, she enjoyed, she said, brief moments of ecstatic bliss, sudden thrills of enlightenment when, as under the influence of some potent drug, or responsive to an angel's touch, the mind feels capable of resolving every enigma of life ; when the doubts, the contradictions, the injustices of nature are no longer felt in their individual, torturing manifestations, but do build themselves up into one harmonious and righteous whole. She remembered the Sun, the Source of all light. And her knowledge of the mighty alchemic operations, whereby all earthly organisms derive their first breath of life and the faculty of continued living, inevitably led her to view the Great Fire as the benign originator and preserver of all things. When she remembered that Solar Virtues fashioned also the wondrous forms of inanimate matter and contrived their manifold tints ; when she reflected that the flashing ruby was kindred, not in colour only but in substance, with the arterial life that flowed through her veins ; then she encountered the Great Truth—the truth of the kinship, of the tie of blood

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that binds the Cosmos to herself and to all mankind, whose structure contains the common properties of the earth, whose humours of body and mind are swayed by her satellite, whose very thoughts are but expressions of solar energy. In the contemplation of these vistas her own individual preoccupations, and those of her fellow-creatures, seemed to melt away like mists. There was grandeur, she declared, in such views. There was a tuneful sequence of cause and effect. Above all, there was repose. . . .

Heaven knows what were her ulterior intentions with regard to the education of her child, but I presume she meditated for him some years of travel among the capitals of the world, where he might shake off any singularity or unmanliness acquired during his solitary childhood. In the meanwhile the principal task she imposed upon herself and upon his teachers was that he should grow up free from those superstitions from which she had painfully liberated herself; free at the same time from all dogmatic assertion of knowledge, from that lack of consideration for the opinions of others which characterised, I regret to say, his own father, whose common politeness was wont to evaporate, together with his common sense, in the heat of a discussion.

The due alloy of humility and dignity, that

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ideal state, was nowhere to be discovered, she thought, save in the teachings of Nature. For a purely metaphysical education is apt to infect young minds with the malady of introspection, while priestcraft, that seeks to humanise the Great Unknown, thereby debases it and exalts its creatures above their station. Few, I imagine, would have known better than herself how to draw from the common truths of Nature such lessons as might tend to humble him before that Great Unknown—humbling, simultaneously and conclusively, the derisive pretensions of his fellows; none more able to decompose (as she used to express herself) the dry light of knowledge into those rainbow tints of kindliness that soften and gladden the human heart; to extract, with magician's cunning, the *romance* of life out of its murky facts, even as out of that foul coal-tar some, who know the secret, craftily distil most delicate aromas and colours exquisite.

All these educational designs, I remember, sounded admirable at the time when she propounded them. Looking at things in the light of later knowledge, I cannot but think that she leaned unduly towards the side of sentimentality.

Her projects, whatever they were, remained unfulfilled; for she died in the following spring, after a short illness, leaving the child at a critical

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age, and hardly yet able to realise the immensity of his loss. Of the following years of his life I only know that he seldom left the mountains, and that, with an astuteness worthy of a better cause, he soon managed to dismiss his various tutors and to thwart his guardians into a sullen compliance with his wishes up to the day when he could legally dispense with their services. In later years he often expressed regret at his boyish waywardness and intolerance.

. . . . .

GAUDIUM. Serenus ac tranquillus est aer.

RATIO. Quanto malleu serenus ac tranquillu esset animu tuus.—PETRARCA.

Many years elapsed before I again had an opportunity of seeing him. He was grown to manhood. But I was concerned to observe that many of the tastes which he may be supposed to have inherited or acquired from his mother had deviated, so to speak, from their natural line of development. He never possessed her controlling common sense. Whether consciously or not, he carried all her peculiarities to extremes.

The yearning towards the extra-human, for instance, that was so intelligible on her part, had degenerated in the young man into something akin, and yet very different. I refer to an unhealthy craving after the *monstrous*, which survived

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throughout his short life, and coloured, or discoloured, all his thoughts and actions. Whatever was normal, serene, reposeful, was liable, *eo ipso*, to become distasteful to him. This propensity towards the inordinate, the grotesque, is more widely distributed than may be supposed. I could cite the names of several eminent writers and artists of recent times whose minds are undoubtedly tainted, though in a lesser degree, with this idiosyncrasy. It is an essentially modern phenomenon; a protest, possibly (like the pest of symbolism), on the part of man's mystery-loving soul against the scientific spirit of the times. Its psychological investigation might prove an interesting study.

And that which, in his mother's case, was a justifiable desire for solitude, a deliberate retirement with a set purpose, had become with him a morbid and irrational disinclination to leave his home. He was consistent in nothing so much as his refusal to make himself acquainted with the actual living world of men. I hardly think he was out of his own domain more than once in the course of his life.

And his life in this eagle's nest was not only solitary, it was absolutely aimless. He possessed talents of no mean order, and sometimes, in a frenzy of good intentions, he would lock himself

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into his library to pursue the study of some particular subject. But he suffered from one of the commonest defects of genius: diffusiveness, lack of concentrative grasp; he recoiled at the immensity of the task before him, sighed at the impossibility of realising his intellectual projects, and therefore dreaded to tread where a less dainty and pretentious person would have boldly ventured. His mental horizon extended too far, and in this again I seem to recognise a perversion of those broad, all-comprehensive views of his mother. How many great men have been lost to the world through this failure to realise their own limitations! A restless spirit is a dungeon unto itself. His very thirst for knowledge, his manifold ambitions, paralysed his initiative. In fact, he simply lacked the sense of measure, and the standards which he set up for himself were such as no mortals may hope to attain. When piqued on his indolence, he used to quote Bacon's counsel as to reading, 'not to learn, but to weigh and consider,' and advised his friends to do likewise; at other times he gravely professed as a legitimate, and even laudable, aim in life, to *study his individuality*—a masked form of egoism, if that term can be employed in speaking of one who, with all his whims, was the type and pattern of humility.

His caprice at first found an object in re-

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constructing the mansion of his birth to the total neglect of his other family seats and upon a scale entirely disproportionate to his needs. While the fit lasted the work proceeded furiously. Building materials were transported at an enormous cost up the congested glen, and the weary labourers, summoned from distant towns and villages, lived in crowded sheds and complained of ague and insufficient nourishment. He fitted the house with such luxurious appliances of modern comfort as ill accorded with its rustic character, and amazed his somewhat infrequent visitors. Under his hands it grew into the outward token of a tormented mind. Meaningless towers reared their heads into the clouds, and at every turn in the interior the eye was confounded by some grotesque arrangement of colour or design. The evident intention was to astonish rather than to please. He built huge conservatories to contain forests of palms, and one day, I remember, there wound up the valley some thirty or forty waggons containing a costly assortment of vegetable products from Central America, poisonous growths of almost bestial shapes, that fatten on air and sun-scorched rock ; tortoises among plants, slow-growing, uncouth, tenacious of life ; with porcupine spikes and blossoms of scarlet flame. I commented upon this singularly unlovely collection.



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'It pleases me and harms no one,' he replied. That was his favourite palliation of every folly.

The mention of tropical plants recalls a conversation that is yet fresh in my mind. It began with his reading out to me a glowing but fantastic description of a Brazilian primeval forest, *as he imagined it*, in which one particular passage ran something to this effect :—

*'It was a dazzling spectacle. A blaze of colour rained down upon my eyes. Clusters of flowers wrestled with the matted branches, wreathing themselves into golden festoons that glittered with lightning flashes, or hung in mid-air, dangling by gossamer threads, like tremulous stars of light. To my left, a torrent of blood-red blossoms, of wondrous shapes, streamed down some blighted trunk, while a stupendous liana . . .'*

'Just so,' I said. 'Just so! That comes of not travelling. If you had ever visited one of these forests you would have noticed that they are remarkably devoid of flowering plants. They are nothing but tangled emerald wildernesses.'

'Well?' he asked. 'And your conclusion?'

'Therefore travel. In this isolation you cannot avoid acquiring exaggerated views and opinions. You have just proved it yourself, you see.'

'Exaggeration is the salt of life.'

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'Your knowledge of the world would be corrected and enlarged.'

'I have my books, and my imagination.'

'It is precisely your imagination that is liable to lead you astray,' I urged. 'The naked truth is always different.'

'The naked truth is always disenchanting. I prefer my illusions to your realities. Hence this isolation that you disparage.'

'You prefer the wrong to the right?'

He ~~only~~ smiled.

'What are right and wrong in such matters? Nothing but pitfalls, stumbling-blocks in our search after delight. You have just proved it yourself, you see! ~~The~~ beauty is only to be found *perfect* here,' he added, tapping his forehead with a significant gesture. 'You would contract the sphere of the beautiful, whereas I seek to widen it, deliberately and systematically, with a view to increasing my own capacity for enjoyment.'

'At the expense of common sense?' I asked.

'Common sense is a good servant but a bad master.'

'And in disregard of experience?'

'Where experience enters fancy flees. Besides,' he added evasively, 'I have my mountains, you know.'

'An intelligent person,' I maintained, 'is not

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permanently satisfied with contemplating even the sublimest phenomena of Nature.'

'You remind me of Doctor Johnson.'

'Because,' I insisted, 'they lack the element of tradition. To be able to discover in a mountain something more than a mere terrestrial deformity argues a certain modern complexity of feeling. A simple peasant has no eye for these natural beauties, but a worldly man, who rarely loses touch with the human race, or a poet, who is daily reminded of its petty hopes and fears, appreciates, nowadays at least, this solemnity. Therefore go first to the Ganges and the Nile, to Persepolis and Rome and Athens; observe how the works of man have grown and perished. Then return to your eternal mountains and be assured that they will speak to you in a new tongue.'

'You are altogether too bound up in your fellow-creatures. That is what makes you so sententious. As for my mountains, I am quite satisfied with them as they are. And I do not wish them to speak to me: *I only wish to speak to them.*'

As he uttered these last words his voice sank to a pathetic whisper.

'Even that is hardly a sufficient motive for secluding yourself half a lifetime among them.'

'Drive that nightmare of motivation out of your

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head!' he cried. 'It is based upon a pernicious misconception of the human mind. I do not profess to be guided by any motives. Where are my motives? Doubtless they are slumbering somewhere in my brain, or more probably in my lower gastric region, but I have never attempted to make their acquaintance. And please don't stir them up for me,' he added, with a laugh, 'or I may be suddenly seized with a disastrous longing to learn Chinese or to join the Moravian Brotherhood.'

'That is precisely what I was about to suggest to you. Even if you remain here your life need not necessarily be an idle one. There is a world of suffering and strife and unkindliness to be medicined. Your wealth, your position, offers exceptional facilities for becoming—'

'A missionary? a policeman or a scavenger? Fellow-creatures again? No. The world is too full of useful persons already. They create daily new desires and new complaints and new regrets, besides encouraging over-population. We breed our proletariat as if they were orchids.'

'If you knew the world you would be more charitable. Then do something, at least, with your own talents,' I suggested.

'Do something! Do something! That seems to be the chief infatuation of modern times. Do

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something! Are we never to grow out of that puerile doctrine again? The Gospel of work, my friend, is written only for paupers. Work for the poor, leisure for the rich! It is only in our enlightened age that the expression "a man of leisure, a *dilettant*, an amateur" have become tinctured with the flavour of reproach. It is only nowadays that a man dares to confess: "I am old and rich, but my mind lacks resources. I cannot entertain myself. I am a cart horse—harness me: a drudge—kick me to my desk." What shall be said of a society that prides itself upon such monsters? Progress? Perhaps. But not civilisation.'

'I see. Your principle is: do nothing, *and that well*.'

'You have formulated it very clearly and concisely,' he replied, smiling—a charming smile, full of unaffected, childlike perverseness. It was this particular smile, I suspect, that alienated from him a good many excellent persons who would otherwise have given him credit at least for sincerity and self-consistency. But they saw only the fretful dreamer, dogmatic and supercilious, while a sympathetic mind soon discovered in him an homogeneous entity, delightfully different from those composite characters of whom the world is only too full.

The last occasion upon which I saw my friend was not many weeks before that deplorable accident concerning which enough, and more than enough, has been written. He struck me at first as being more tolerant and reasonable than formerly. I imagined that he had reached a turning-point in his development, the termination of one of those definite life periods when all men worthy of the name, having passed through a cleansing process of spiritual desquamation and slipped their outworn weeds of thought and feeling, enter with quickened pulses upon a fresh and radiant existence. He had always represented to my mind the type of a Northern nature, slow but strong, groping its way unaided from darkness to light, and only attaining full intellectual maturity at a comparatively late age.

It was not long, however, before he took me into his new 'paragon' library, that has likewise not escaped its share of comment. I could see at a glance that it had been constructed according to his own ideas—ideas that were generally right in principle and sometimes singularly felicitous, but seldom lacked the savour of the outrageous (*outré*) in their execution. This was not so much a single room as an associated group of small

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chambers, opening into each other by archways at irregular angles, with a not unpleasing labyrinthine effect. There were nine of these separate compartments, voluptuously furnished, and dedicated, he told me, to the Nine Muses. He explained that in thus breaking up the space his intention was to prevent the studious eye from unconsciously wandering, and that he generally excluded the intrusive daylight with the same object, closing all the shutters and lighting a lamp at mid-day in order to illuminate the particular cell in which he happened to be engaged, while the rest of the suite was artificially drowned in Egyptian gloom.

The walls of these nine chambers were concealed behind an unnumbered multitude of books, reposing in cases of aromatic Oriental woods whose heavy perfume saturated the air. There were works of every size and age and in every tongue. Besides those that might naturally be found in a scholar's library, I observed entire shelves groaning under a load of folios, fancy bindings, *éditions de luxe*, or monographs upon subjects whose very existence was unknown save to students. For a private collection it was the most heterogeneous one I ever saw. He guessed my thoughts.

‘Call it, rather, a geological deposit—contorted, perhaps, but not faulty. There are well-marked

strata of different classes of books, according to the different phases of my life, each of which has produced a crop of literature that has temporarily interested me. The books may look confused, but. . . .’

‘. . . There is no such confusion in my head,’ he was perhaps going to say, but a fear of ridicule caused him to break off abruptly.

In one chamber I stumbled upon an immense pile of unclassified manuscripts. These were the fruits of a certain occupation that he had pursued, with rare consistency, throughout life ; namely, the systematic collection and elaboration of all those local legends in which that part of the country abounded. His knowledge of the district lore, I am told, was nothing short of marvellous in regard to its extent and minuteness. He made himself acquainted with every nook of the mountains ; not a rill, not a ruin escaped his eye ; and the archives of parishes, monasteries and private mansions were ransacked for any extracts that might bear upon the history of his domain and of the particular glen which he had learned to love with an almost fanatical veneration.

And, needless to say, all that inclined to the *monstrous* (and what are old chronicles but a compilation of monstrosities ?) exercised a peculiar charm upon him ; in fact, it was probably this



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one quality that endeared to him the pursuit. He confessed to an inordinate liking for the Middle Ages, with their grim sorceries, prodigies and demonology ; whereas I used to contend that they constitute the most disgraceful era of man's history upon earth, being nothing but a long succession of murders and prayers, enlivened only by the buffoonery of knight-errantry and occasional visitations of the plague ; an age where everything is improbable, and what is not improbable is *worse*.

‘ Ah, but read this,’ he said triumphantly, as he tenderly fished out a single parcel from among the pile.

It was a mediæval legend connected with the site of his own house. I read it, and found it remarkable only in so far as it seemed even more grotesque than the generality of its kind. But herein, no doubt, lay its fascination for my friend.

## The Devil's Oak

THOSE low, rounded hillocks near the mansion, with their emerald moss of exquisite softness and lichen-encrusted stones, are all that now remains of an ancient and renowned monastery wherein was preserved, for many long years, a relic of no small interest. But alas for the permanence of man's best works! The country was invaded, in the early days of the Crusades, by certain of the revolted peasantry, who impiously sacked and burned the convent, slaughtered the good monks and filched the relic albeit worthless to themselves. To expiate this crime the prince of the country, not long afterwards, caused the venerable forests of oak and juniper and fir to be hewn down and dragged into the swollen wintry torrent, that tossed them past hamlets and villages into the calm river and the docks of the city, where they were wrought into proud galleys that swept the blue ocean and bore the terror of Christian valour into distant pagan lands.

Much of this forest, indeed, might have been

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destroyed without disadvantage at an earlier period, for it was said to have been so dense in the days before the monastery was yet built, and when the Light of the Gospel yet shone but faintly in this darkness, that not everyone had the heart to venture into its seclusion. They feared the gloom that brooded over it.

They feared, too, its evil repute. For it was known with certainty that bloody abominations had formerly been observed in this very glen by such as loved not well-built churches but raised altars to their foul gods in the natural shade of a grove. And strange it is to think how hard they died, these devils' practices, considering the effulgence of our divine faith, and how long divers of those heathen shapes, that Christian saints could not kill outright nor subdue, were permitted to linger in sequestered clefts or in the stony desert, where they have been encountered at various times, face to face, by the men of God, as may be read in their lives.

In those days, therefore, when little was ascertained and all was believed, it was commonly supposed, among the poorer sort of folk, that some such evil spirits did still reside in this dark vale; and the more reasonably supposed, inasmuch as not a few of the early converts to Christianity, woodcutters and others, who had dared to penetrate into

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the forest, never more returned to their homes. Not a vestige of them was ever found. It was, indeed, as if they had been clean spirited away.

But the full truth of the matter was not revealed until one morning when a certain young woman of the country, Uswida by name, poor but renowned for her Christian piety, left that small village, whose site is now no longer remembered, to gather berries with her child under the trees. It is reported that they had not wandered far before the little one, oppressed, maybe, with the unaccustomed heat of early summer, began to cry of weariness. And the woman likewise, strong as she was, suddenly felt drowsy to a wondrous degree.

Then, looking around her in the green twilight of overhanging trees, she espied near at hand an oak of great age, standing somewhat apart by itself, stout and comely, decked in glittering leaves, without a blemish, a prince among his fellows, whose far-projecting and high-perched roots seemed to invite her, as one who should say, 'Come ! lie down and rest at my foot.' And soon enough, alas ! she lay down with the child in her lap and was charmed by the beguiling murmur of the leaves into a deep sleep, a fatal sleep ; but what her dreams were, God alone can tell.

The afternoon meanwhile drawing on apace,

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her husband went to seek her. Nor had he proceeded far before he heard wailings and heart-rending cries in the forest, that led him to where stood the oak and where his beloved wife was even now perishing miserably. For the high-perched roots, enkindled and enlivened by some subtle device of the Devil, had clasped mother and child in a stubborn embrace and closed in about them beyond the power of his strong arm, smothering her piteous lamentations; whilst the unholy tree quivered with exertion, its arms swelling like brawny muscles and its rough bark oozing beads of sweat. Last of all, her long golden hair, loosened in the struggle, was slowly sucked into its knotty heart, and wherever a drop of crimson blood had fallen to earth the boughs bent down and greedily lapped it up, nodding for joy. And, in a trice, the hellish growth had assimilated its bloody banquet, and its leaves, fluttering with transports of delight, glowed more defiantly brave and beauteous than before. Heaven knows how many had already yielded up their lives to its enchantment! But the husband turned to flee, stumbling in a trance back to his village.

Now, whether this ancient oak had witnessed, in its youth, the revels and solemnities paid in this grove to the old gods, and had thus itself imbibed, by a Satanic principle, somewhat of the

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monstrous notions of those early days; or whether, in the olden time, its roots were wont to be drenched with the blood of human sacrificial victims and were thereby turned from their natural appetite to prey upon such foul humours; or whether (as some maintained) certain of the banished heathen spirits did truly still haunt this valley, taking up their abode in this tree and clustering among its branches; whatever may be the true exposition of this marvel—and God alone knows!—sure it is that this oak never forgot the false gods of its youth, but clung to them with more than human pertinacity—for we human creatures do justly change upon occasion—clung to them, and revenged them with a hateful and vindictive spirit, resentful of our new resplendent Faith, and satiating its unhallowed lust with Christian blood; a strange example of perverted nature.

A strange example indeed, and its purport altogether beyond our wretched comprehension were it not for that which thereupon ensued, whereby the worth of such prodigies for the good government of mankind is made manifest. For, as concerns the woman's husband, he returned to his village, but found few, or none, among the more enlightened, disposed to give ear to his ravings. They called him moon-struck, possessed

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of the Devil, and what not; and many on that account were for casting him out into the woods whence he came, as was then the custom. But Uswida never returning, the priest finally, with certain others of the country, resolved to accompany him to the spot, in order to view the oak and to pronounce upon it the formula of excommunication. And this they did more to humour him than from any belief in his tale, for they supposed the woman perished through some more natural mishap.

Thus the holy man came and stood before the tree and commenced fervently to utter the sentence. And while he yet spake the words, the Truth was revealed, for the oak's fresh leaves of spring withered and fell faster than flakes of wintry snow, while the turgid trunk rocked to and fro and writhed in agony, lashed by the Word of the Almighty. Suddenly, with a most prodigious crash, it fell to earth. And all the spectators bowed the knee before the apparent miracle.

Nevertheless, even in the very agony of death, it was not unmindful of its old faith, for a certain Mellinus, a pious man and nephew to the priest, approaching too near in his ardour to witness the divine prodigy, was crushed to death under the weight of its falling trunk.

Then all departed and left it lying. And there

## THE DEVIL'S OAK

it lay for many days and many months, till a woodman, passing by chance near the same spot, did observe that one of its branches had again put forth fresh leaves, in defiance of the Power of God. This selfsame branch, therefore, was incontinently lopped off and tortured into the shape of a cross. And it was put aside in a small chapel that was built to commemorate the event, soon afterwards, upon the actual ground where the Devil's Oak had stood.

Meanwhile the report of this miracle was noised abroad into all lands, till it became a notorious matter, and hundreds and thousands flocked together to visit the chapel where the oak had stood, and to contemplate the relic therein preserved; so that, in the end, the once humble chapel grew into a frequented place of pilgrimage, and ultimately into a rich and powerful monastery.

And yet, who would believe it? This fragment of wood, although fashioned into the Sacred Emblem of our Faith and stored away in a consecrated edifice all these many hundreds of years, was never truly reformed to our belief, but remained up to the last crooked and green and twisted awry in mockery. Many a monk and pilgrim of seemingly pure heart hath strained the strength of his piety upon the rebellious log, and sought with tears and prayers to wipe this



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shame from off the face of the earth, In vain !  
The oaken cross did crucify them all ; and this  
is not the least marvellous part of a tale which,  
although now forgotten, is none the less true.

Likely enough the wholly righteous man might  
yet have been found in the future. But, as it  
befell, the monastery was ~~sacriliciously~~ <sup>sacriliciously</sup> invaded by  
a band of discontented rioters after ages of calm  
prosperity, and the wondrous relic was carried  
away into distant regions and lost, so that the  
very memory of it has faded from mankind.

# The Psychological Moment

## I

NOBODY thought that Alberique would ever marry. Apart from all other considerations, he was much too old.

Yet now, at the end of three years, his friends were obliged to confess that the marriage was as much of a success as could have been expected in view of the difference in the respective ages and characters of the two parties concerned. For she was still almost a child.

In his selection of a wife he had displayed, as usual, his penetration and knowledge of the fair sex. Silvia—with her rose-leaf complexion, her perfect figure, the sunlight of her ruddy hair, and all those external charms to which no one had been more susceptible than her husband—could have done with him whatever she liked, dissipated his means, turned him to ridicule, converted him into a devil. She did none of these things. By honouring Alberique and his position she silenced scandal and demon-

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strated that he had not read amiss the signs of nobility in her features.

Who was Alberique? A mere nobody, so far as wealth was concerned. A peer. But not altogether a languid load of the earth. He had thrust himself before the British public on various occasions by his brilliant administrative talents. Long ago, as Governor of Upper Somnolia, he had developed a disquieting energy that convulsed the Permanent Staff, who, up to their dying day, spoke in an awed whisper of that Reign of Terror. As author, he was studied by a select few who could sympathise with his passion for minute researches into certain aspects of history—a passion, the origin of which may be traced to a justifiable pride in the many romantic vicissitudes that his own family, in the course of centuries, had undergone. For his was one of those families renowned of old for intrigues and escapades and adventures in which, as a rule, the *Ewig-weibliche* played no inconspicuous part. For the rest, he had glided through life unobserved by the many. Hereditary feebleness of constitution, a tendency to vices, were counterbalanced by other qualities envied of most men who can only acquire by patience or bitter experience what he likewise naturally inherited from these interminable ancestors—tact,

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insight, taste. He was quick to judge of a man's worth as of a woman's beauty. His tact was equal to the most embarrassing situations. Self-centred? Doubtless, but courteous at the same time, and generous to all mankind, particularly to pretty women. Ill-health, unhappily, had somewhat soured his temper of late, and drawn more frequent lines about his smooth-shaven, once handsome features. His hair was of the thin texture of one who has lived, perhaps, too well.

They had just returned from a winter in Egypt. The pale, ungenerous rays of an early spring afternoon penetrated through the lace curtains of their London drawing-room. Silvia, standing at the window, drew them aside to let in more light. She had never found England so gloomy before. She was still dazzled with the remembrance of the glowing sunsets, the orange-tawny desert, the monstrous carvings and all the strange experiences of the last months, for she was none too old to feel wonder, nor too affected to profess indifference. She had been brought up unacquainted with the world, its marvels, its realities. Like some hothouse flower she had hitherto breathed the tepid atmosphere of London Society, knowing nothing of the storms of life, nothing of its intense joys—

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nothing of such joy as the snowdrop feels in that sweet awakening from its wintry sleep amid the rough caresses of the northern wind. Impulsive and ambitious by nature, she had early learned demure ways.

The recollection of that wonderland of Egypt had aroused new interests in her: vague yearnings, hitherto unfelt, for another existence.

She ventured to open the window, after casting an anxious look to assure herself that Alberique was well protected from the air. The moist warmth poured in, and with it came wafted all the seductive lassitude of spring, the hopes, the fears, the tender longings that penetrate, on such days, to the soul of man even through the smoky shell of a great city. A passive life! She had expected more of marriage. She wondered what ailed her. Looking around, she saw contentment everywhere, save in her own heart.

Outside, the street passengers passed one another briskly before her eyes, each intent upon his own particular duty. All was life and activity. The carriages, emerging with cheerful din from the bluish haze, splashed through the river of gold at her feet and vanished again like streaks of light. Some children were playing on the glittering wet asphalt near the house steps.

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She listened a while to their merry young laughter, and then closed the window sadly. At such moments Silvia had an intuition of what life might have been.

There was indeed a void somewhere, a great void, in her existence.

If she were at least allowed to continue her music . . .

Alberique's voice, frail and high-pitched, but of peculiar charm, broke in upon her meditations.

'You will require cheering up in this gloomy place. You must take to your violin again, Silvia.'

'How can I?' she replied regretfully. 'You know you forbade me—'

'Allow me, dearest, to apologise for my mistake and my unkindness. You must bear with me, and pardon the unamiable caprice of an invalid. You don't know what it is to be an invalid.' And he sighed, a very sincere sigh. He added: 'I feel, now, as if I could dissolve away upon the strains of your instrument. But I wish. . . . I wish. . . .'

Perhaps he wished for youth.

Silvia did not always fathom his wishes. Barely twenty years of age, she felt quite a child beside him, more especially as he seemed to take pleasure in deliberately keeping her ignorant upon many

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matters. 'How can one be so old,' she often wonderingly asked herself, 'and yet feel such a child?' But she, at least, had often endeavoured to interest herself in his occupations, whereas this was certainly the first time that he had alluded to her playing in an appreciative manner. Perhaps, she thought, it might really do him good. She was solicitous for nothing so much as his health; his enfeeblement only fostered her devotion.

Upon that score Alberique allowed himself to cherish no illusions. He was approaching the seventh climacteric, beyond which he could hardly hope to pass. Certain fainting fits had warned him of serious organic trouble, and the weakness had become more apparent since his marriage. For alas! the union, though a happy one, had been, in other respects, a grievous miscalculation. Alberique had drooped and faded away like some tender convolvulus, in that glorious sunshine. He had hoped to enter upon a second youth with an infusion of new life. But it came contrariwise. He gave all, receiving nothing in return. The ruddy vampire, innocent of intent, drained away his life. Egypt, he felt, had done him no good.

Presently he renewed the subject.

'I suppose, after this long pause in your

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studies, you will require a teacher—at least, at first?’

No answer. Silvia was thinking of her former teacher, Lennox, a young Scotchman of more than common talent. Looking back now upon the past days of their intercourse, she felt that he had gained more influence over her than she cared to admit.

Indeed, the Scotch Paganini, as he was called, exerted, by the mere strength of his character, a strange power over all who came in contact with him and could appreciate the high aims of his life. Born of a good family, he had deliberately chosen, early in youth, the art of the violin as a profession, and had pursued his studies stubbornly, with that craving after perfection, that determination to excel, without which genius is an empty name. His pupils were few, wealthy, and of highest promise. His infrequent appearances on the concert platform were the signal for unwonted outpourings on the part of the Press. The critics, with patriotic fervour, compared him to some young high priest, pale with the scourge of study, about to initiate an unbelieving world into the mysteries of which he was the chosen interpreter. To see his sober mien, his well-bred, conciliatory bow to the public, was as good, they said, as a



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liberal education. And then, the way in which he took his instrument out of its case and lovingly, reverentially, tuned it, constituted in itself (they declared) a poem—a revelation. . . .

Silvia was wondering what had become of Lennox. No doubt, among the interests of an active professional life, he had already forgotten his former pupil.

‘Why not Lennox?’

She started at the sound of his name. But Alberique was smiling an enigmatical smile. It was really as if he had mentioned Lennox on purpose, as if he had led her thoughts up to this point for some object of his own. What that object might be she could not even guess. She remained silent, but her husband insisted:—

‘What if you wrote to Lennox?’

He was looking at her, now, in a manner that almost scared her. There was mingled defiance and regret in his eyes. Was it love? Some composite emotion, no doubt, that he could not, or would not, formulate.

But why speak of Lennox? Why speak of him, the unfold of her talents, to whom she had looked up with childlike veneration, whose name conjured up the now forbidden fairyland of art, whose remembrance she had erased from her young mind, not, perhaps, without a sigh.

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To be permitted to take up music again was almost too good to be true. But why Lennox?

Alberique persisted:—

‘I have blamed myself bitterly all this time for discouraging your love of music. No! Don’t thank me! I am only doing what I ought to have done long ago. Forgive me, rather, for this delay. I met him once—Lennox, I mean. Seems a gentleman. You were his favourite pupil, I hear, and if so, I am sure you will become his favourite pupil again. You can go on with him, you know, where you left off. He looks as if he could appreciate . . . favourite pupils of your style.’ Here he laughed, and soon added, almost imperiously, ‘Write to him, dear, and make an appointment.’

This speech confused her considerably. Alberique had a way of making ambiguous allusions to her person that were absolutely incomprehensible to her. She tried to puzzle out his meaning. He evidently expected her to say something.

‘Really?’ she inconclusively faltered, at last. And then more resolutely, ‘Why Lennox?’

‘Why not?’

Why not, indeed?

But Silvia, instead of rejoicing, grew sad. She sighed, as with an immense despair, for

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she seemed to see, advancing towards her, some ill-defined, terrible phantom, that threatened her future peace and happiness.

### II

SINCE her marriage she had never seen the Scotch Paganini. She only knew this much, that, soon after that event, he had broken off his English engagements and had left London for the Continent in order to perfect his already highly-chastened style (so the newspapers announced) under a certain master in the Belgian capital.

All this was true enough. There, locked up in his room, violin in hand, he wrestled anew with his old opponent, struggled with the brute material of string and bow, purged away, through sheer physical exhaustion, every other remembrance of life. Here was an adversary worthy of himself, endowed with more than human obstinacy, one who gave no advantages: all the yielding must be on *his* side. . . .

But Silvia did not know — how could she? ignorant as she was of his nature—that Lennox now lived like one who, gazing long into the sun,

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yet sees its spectral image burning wherever his glance may stray; that amid the mazes of Tartini and Saint-Saëns there mingled and floated and glowed persistently, before his mental eye, the picture of her own ambrosial smile, the golden witchery of her hair.

For his character was primitive as Alberique's complex. He was one of those men of natural, not acquired, purity, who, oppressed with disappointment and temptation, are not led away by the allurements of *Venus vulgivaga*, but cling to their first ideal, and exalt it with all the devotion of their simple natures. And in the course of these few years he had experienced, in his own person, a singular phenomenon. In proportion as he schooled his judgment and delved deeper into the mysteries of musical art—mastering its intricacies, realising its limitations, discriminating its beauties—the picture of Silvia likewise became clearer and more lovely. His taste, refined and exclusive, enabled him, now, to discover charms in her person that had hitherto escaped his appreciation. He could detect no discordant note in that roseate symphony. One might almost think that day by day, as the artist grew more discerning, more enamoured of pure form, Silvia, on her part, shook off the attributes of common mortality

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and resolved herself into the incarnation of all harmony and proportion. From being beautiful, she had become flawless.

And, after these radiant visions—the Reality!

Lennox, who used to have faith in his Star and believe in the ultimate adjustment of Fate, was growing sadly despondent. But when, on the eve of his departure for England, he emerged from the three years' fray emaciated as with monkish self-chastisement, when he had deposited his violin for the last time in its case and asked himself, wearily, *what next?*—his eye, roving round the room in a farewell glance, happened to fall upon a letter that lay at his elbow.

It must have arrived that very evening. . . .

If, in a moment of self-flattery, Lennox imagined that he owed his introduction into Alberique's household to some machinations on the part of Silvia, he was quickly undeceived by her grave demeanour, that silently rebuked such an assumption. To whom, then, was he indebted for this honour? He took to observing Alberique closely. But Alberique wore a mask. He had met his advances with dignified ease and professed to take the greatest pleasure in bringing Silvia and himself together. Was Alberique, then, the far-seeing, grown blind? To their duets he often

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listened with rapt attention; at other times he leaned back on a couch, book in hand, and seemed to doze. Perhaps he marched, in imagination, with the scarred veterans of Pizarro upon some incredible expedition across the Peruvian Sierras, or saw himself gliding pliantly, obsequiously, among the gilded pageantry of Versailles. Perhaps—who knows?—he was watching Silvia all the time out of the corner of his eye, and taking a kind of pleasure, as Lennox surmised, in the spectacle of her resistance to his own insidious attacks. A cruel amusement, but one characteristic of his complex nature. Or was it all generosity on Alberique's part? Generosity—to himself? A perverse form of generosity, and a dangerous one.

But Lennox soon, very soon, desisted from attempting to solve the enigma of Alberique, and confined himself to Silvia. He thanked God for this opportunity of seeing her, whoever its immediate author might be, and made the most of it. He was no lover of the sugar-water type! Lennox, the dreamer in Brussels, had changed considerably since his arrival. All the energy stored up during those years was released at the sight of his ideal. His primitive passions, aroused by personal contact with their object, ignited as a consuming fire. He never attempted to conceal

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from Silvia the state of his heart ; he waxed bold, impetuous, reckless.

She, womanlike, was ill at ease. She could not help inwardly reproaching her husband for thus wilfully exposing her to temptation. But whatever her thoughts may have been, her external conduct remained irreproachable, although at times she felt her power of resistance giving way before the imperious desire of the other one. What rendered her defence doubly difficult was his assumption that she had loved him from the beginning—him, and him only ; and that she loved him still. How disprove it ? How disprove what she now almost confessed to herself to be true ? To this embarrassment was added her own susceptibility to that art of which, in her eyes, the exponent and personification alike was Lennox, whose genius she revered, whose single-hearted devotion to herself she could not but recognise with respect. Her acute sensibility to music unstrung her reserve and opened vistas to the spiritual eye at which she trembled—she knew not why. There came upon her, under that spell, visions that she would fain have bidden linger for ever, visions of a celestial dawn, the unfolding, as it were, of some proximate, unspeakable bliss.

Looking up timidly, in such moments, she would find his eyes fixed upon her in a steadfast gaze.

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOMENT

He had divined aright! And their thoughts thus coinciding, their lips, unmoved, would say:—

‘Our joy: our hope—how shall we conceal it from him?’

Conceal it?

Alberique knew the truth from the beginning. He knew of their growing infatuation and the inevitable consequence.

But he thought he could surely trust Silvia so long as he lived. She would keep the Scotchman within bounds, whatever his pretensions might be. Soon enough he would be dead, and then they might do what they liked. Another year or two and then—the odious change. In the contemplation of that change he recoiled; his worldly yet sensitive mind, that had dwelt long upon the theme of horror, shuddered at the prospect of a fair human body, that exquisite engine of delights—its right of existence withdrawn, its individuality remorselessly snuffed out—becoming a masterless, meaningless heap; a clod, to be handled irreverently, abhorrently, by common persons; once loved, now loathed of all men; and thrust at last, unresisting, into a coffin, the end of all things—or rather, not the end, but only the beginning of that yet more hideous transformation beyond. How inconceivably hateful it all was! Alberique was loth to part with life: it had dealt fairly with him.



## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

He had neither feared nor despised the pleasures of the world, he only deplored his inability to enjoy them as heretofore.

To console himself, therefore, he had devised an amusement intelligible only to self-indulgent, hypersensuous natures like his own. The spectacle of the two lovers ready to faint within one another's arms—a spectacle that would have driven to desperation most men in his position—afforded Alberique a voluptuous relish, a new zest in life. He had arranged it specially for himself. It was a risky undertaking, he knew; but the temptation had been too great to resist. Alberique was no spendthrift, no drunkard. At a race-meeting, at Monte Carlo, he could afford to laugh at the weaknesses of his fellow-creatures. Transport him to a desert island (bereft of women) and he would have shared his last crust with some shipwrecked sailor. But to anticipate, in the person of Lennox, whom he had selected by some veritable intuition of genius, those joys that he himself could no longer taste; to watch, with sensual interest, a faltering rehearsal of the drama that, he well knew, would be played immediately after his death—this was a temptation after his own heart. Before the idea was yet fully developed he had already yielded.

And he enjoyed his jest prodigiously; the

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOMENT

bitter after-taste only served to tickle his appetite. It possessed, besides, the requisite spice of wrongness, of perversity, without which Alberique's pleasures had long ago become insipid.

For some time past he had been engaged upon a careful study of their characters. He often looked from one to the other and pictured to himself how they would act—their very words, their caresses. Thus, and thus (he would say, complacently)—thus, and nowise differently. Then he would take note of their present exasperation. It was like perfume to his senses and almost compensated for his regret at leaving the world.

Yet, at times, he grew tired of his comedy and told himself plainly the truth. He envied their health, their youth, their beauty. He was afraid of death. And his complacent smile would then crystallise into a hard grin of defiance that distorted his still attractive features.

### III

It was a remarkably dull melody that they were playing. Or, rather, no melody at all. Bach, he thought. . . .

Upon an ottoman under a stately drooping

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

palm, his head upon one hand, his feet crossed, he reclined in a calm and languid attitude that had something of the rigid grace of the leaves that overhung and shadowed him. Little could be seen of him save the sinuous outlines of his figure.

But he lost nothing of the scene, and his eyes were fixed upon Silvia where she stood, violin in hand, beside an immense lamp, whose rosy shade tinged her white shoulders with a warmer glow. They followed the vigorous motion of her arm glancing in the light, and rested, occasionally, upon her scarlet lips parted in emotion. He surveyed her as a connoisseur might survey some flawless Tanagra statuette, from her well-poised head, refulgent in golden glory, down to the dainty feet encased, at that particular moment, in slippers of a peculiarly appetising description. She was palpitating with young life. The pose, he thought, was absolutely perfect. As for her colouring! . . . She had all the loveliness of a Naiad, with nothing of her chill.

Oh, yes! There was no denying her beauty, damn it, and if he were only twenty years younger, or even ten. . . . She had actually improved, he thought, since her marriage. Her eye was brighter, fuller; while that veiled look of maidenhood yet lingered about those lips. Her waist was still that of a young girl.

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOMENT

He laughed uneasily, and his glance wandered in the direction of the Scotchman, who, under some pretext, had laid aside his instrument and contrived to take up, at the piano, a position convenient for eyeing Silvia. He played a listless accompaniment, only accentuating a phrase here and there. Alberique, whilst admiring the young man's adroitness, began to feel almost sorry for his continued repulses at the hand of Silvia. In his present somewhat cheerless mood he needed distraction. He would have liked a little more movement in the play, some diverting incident that might have afforded him the opportunity of making one of his withering but proverbially tactful remarks and exulting over their subsequent discomfiture. They were such very correct lovers. He was almost tired of their correctness.

But Lennox, far from being animated, had become preternaturally grave. He was marveling at Silvia's music, for she certainly played as she had never played before. It was an artistic problem that wholly absorbed him. He lost sight, temporarily, of the woman and saw only the performer. And, as she proceeded, his astonishment at her mastery of the instrument grew apace. He was surprised at her technique and control of expression. He was amazed, above all things, at the loftiness of her interpretation.

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

Then, gazing into her face, he saw that it was irradiated with joy—transfigured by the magic of love. Her heart came out upon those strains.

The older man had not been slow to observe the alteration in her physiognomy and how the dull melody swelled into a pæan of life. His sensitive mind instantly guessed the import of the change. Silvia, for the first time, was breaking down her reserve. She was casting aside her veil of demureness and assumed indifference—taking the lead, encouraging her torpid lover. Here was a contingency for which he had not provided. How would it end?

He knew her impulsive nature too well to think that, once roused, she would rest content with half measures. And what then? As Silvia's husband, he had been amused by her secret love for the other; as her master, he was irritated by this confession of it. He began to dislike the wilful parade of her beauty; and this parade of her sentiments, under the disguise of music, was yet more obnoxious to him. With a sudden revulsion of feeling he told himself that the affair had gone far enough—too far. He saw his mistake. But how amend it? He would gladly have spoken and put an end to the tension, but how set about it? Silvia played on, regardless of

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOMENT

his menacing look, unaware, in her exaltation, of his existence.

And then that thought, upon which he had often dwelt with a kind of insane pleasure, suddenly thrust itself upon him in its most offensive aspect.

'I will be dead soon, dead—the food of worms. Ah, the sinister transformation! The pitiful consummation! And they? Thus, and thus. . . . Ah, curse! Curse their folly and my own!'

The blood was leaving his face, upon which a malignant look had settled. His breath came rapidly and he leaned forwards, grinding his teeth and grasping in his long fingers a gossamer wisp of silken hair. He still endeavoured to control his excitement, knowing its pernicious effect upon his health.

But she continued to play, and Lennox had dropped his hand from the keyboard and was staring, wonder-stricken, at his former pupil. He had not often heard Bach unriddled after this fashion. He seemed to have lost sense of time and place, and to roam far away, among cool wooded glades with the sunlight pouring through the glittering leaves overhead, to breathe the fragrance of dew-spangled moss and fern, to hear the caress of light winds playing among the crowns, the melodious rustling of leaves and

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

e /  
streamlets, and all those charmed woodland voices which the master himself, in his solitary wanderings, had heard and thenceforth /imprisoned everlastingly—coaxing their reluctant echoes into those numbers whose enchantment none but chosen spirits, little less than angels, can unseal.

That heated London drawing-room, with its thousand artificial contrivances, its carpets, its bronzes, its general atmosphere of weary refinement, was invaded and filled by Silvia's music as with a living breath of clean spring air.

The snowdrop's awakening. . . .

And in that hour the Scotchman's love, tainted of late by a worldly, carnal flavour, was again quickened and purified. He knew that Silvia, the artist, had lighted her torch at the same altar as himself. She had demonstrated the nobility of her soul, her exalted intelligence, her right to the homage of common mortality.

She ceased, flushed and breathing fast. And immediately it seemed to Lennox as though a curtain were drawn aside: the artist had melted away from before his eyes and he beheld again the woman whom he loved, radiant and adorable. And he knew the truth. This, then, was her answer to his pleading. It was an answer plain and altogether lovely—she loved him. But for the faded, frivolous form crouching yonder he

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOMENT

would have fallen upon his knees and worshipped her as a goddess. Love given and returned : what was lacking ?

Nothing, he felt, was lacking save—the occasion.

But when the strains had ceased to vibrate in the air, a profound silence followed. It lay heavy upon them all. Neither of the men seemed inclined to speak.

At last Lennox remarked, in a choked voice :—

‘A divine rendering.’

How hollow the words sounded ! How trivial, tactless, almost impertinent—false. False, indeed : he should have said *surrendering*. For Silvia knew that she would now yield at the first touch of her lover’s hand. Distance of space alone kept her upright.

Lennox himself was aware how unworthy his remark had been of the dignity of the moment, but he was determined to break the spell, for in that silence he heard the throbbing of his own heart, and felt himself drawn towards her by a power stronger than his own will. There was danger in that silence. He still restrained himself, with difficulty, for her sake.

Silvia only shuddered—a sense of trouble had suddenly come upon her, as though she had been detected in some guilty action.

She made no answer.



## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

There was another long pause.

She ventured to look at her lover, but encountered a glance of fire that made her cast down her eyes, bewildered.

Alberique said never a word. So far as she could see, he was grinning from ear to ear in a meaningless fashion.

The strain became intense, intolerable.

Then she observed, with dismay, that Lennox had risen to his feet and was taking a step in her direction. He came still nearer, trembling with passion. He was now almost at arm's length. Heavens! Had he lost all control over himself?

With a supreme effort she shook off the fascination and remembered Alberique. She quickly faced about and turned to her husband for comfort and support. Gladly enough, in that one moment, would she have thrown her arms around Alberique and cried beseechingly in his ear:—

'Save me! Take me from him! Save me before it is too late! Once in his arms, I am lost to you—lost for evermore. Why sit there and say nothing? Oh, Alberique—one word!'

Surely, she thought, Alberique would redeem the situation. He was notorious for his consummate tact. Alberique could always be relied upon to do the right thing at the right moment.

Alberique had fainted away. . . .

## The Meeting of Autos and Eschata

AUTOS. The chill has worn away. I have slept an enduring sleep—a sleep of a hundred, of ten thousand years: who shall say? Time ceased to exist from that moment when, the disintegration accomplished, the last of my earthly particles did painfully creep away to build up new life. But now a change is upon me. I am no longer alone. Some presence intrudes itself upon my repose, rousing me from my trance of dreamless being. Who approaches?

ESCHATA. The bitterness is past.

AUTOS. Who speaks?

ESCHATA. I shiver. Yet streams of fire pervade me. Ah, I have remembered . . .

AUTOS. Who speaks?

ESCHATA. A woman, and the last of the human kind.

AUTOS. The last of the human kind?

ESCHATA. Even so.

AUTOS. The end has come, then?

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

ESCHATA. It has come. All is past, but, alas ! not forgotten.

AUTOS. Your news affects me wondrously little. At this distance of time my earthly life seems to have been but the fever of an hour, a noisy interlude between two periods of ambrosial slumber. The world, doubtless, was engulfed in red combustion amid the crack of continents and the hiss of tormented waters, even as was foretold by the Apostle in the Holy Book ?

ESCHATA. I know not of whom you speak.

*in* AUTOS. Or, it may be, the prediction of our philosophers was verified. They taught, if I err not, that the earth would surely starve out in ice and ashes, its ~~e~~ternal fires smouldering down to such stillness as the frozen bowels of the moon. All life, they said, would then fade away in frigid desolation. And these men were much regarded, for they prophesied by the light of reason.

ESCHATA. I know not of whom you speak.

AUTOS. Strange ! My interest waxes. Tell me, then, what affliction, God or Devil, wiped away the fair life upon the globe, the beasts, the birds, the delectable plantations, and all the blithe millions of the human race ? What calamity fell upon them ?

ESCHATA. A gnat.

AUTOS. A gnat ?

## MEETING OF AUTOS AND ESCHATA

ESCHATA. Even so.

AUTOS. Strange indeed! I remember that, in my day, certain tracts of the earth's surface were cursed by creatures of this sort. There were regions in the African Continent, and in that of the New World, where men were teased out of life by insect plagues of various kinds. Your visitation, I conceive, was somewhat of this nature, but in degree immeasurably worse.

ESCHATA. I know not of what places you speak.

AUTOS. Wondrous! Have you not read of these things in your books?

ESCHATA. The arts of which you speak, and all others, ceased to be cultivated long before my birth. I know them but by hearsay. Lands had lost remembrance of their names. Books had moulded away. For the life of my fellow-creatures was an unceasing battle with the fiends of the air. They hung about us and sucked us dry, one by one. I was the last to perish.

AUTOS. Unhappy world! I loved it not, yet needs must I now sorrow for it. How came the end?

ESCHATA. By slow degrees. It is said that mankind, at first, made light of the visitation, as it were a matter of mirthful talk. But the days brought no betterment. Then they sought to shield themselves with nets and unguents and

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

masks and fumigations and all manner of devices. Soon, however, not a spot upon the earth's surface was free from the affliction. Men herded together in cities, for they of the country were driven away from their work by the dense swarms. Soon, nothing availing, they burnt down the forests in prodigious conflagrations in order to shield themselves behind the clouds of smoke. But the days brought no betterment. It was publicly confessed that no remedy could be devised. Then, indeed, an immense despondency fell over all. Men saw how matters stood, and they feared to look one another in the eye. They put on new faces. Each thought for himself alone. Certain teachers arose with unprofitable discourse and charms. They were crucified for their pains. The sky, meanwhile, grew darker overhead, although the fiends yet remained minute in size. They penetrated everywhere—the air was full of their music: their stings goaded the meekest to madness.

AUTOS. I conjecture that the waters upon the earth had spread, befouling the land with noisome swamps and thus generating this pestilence.

ESCHATA. I know not. But this I know, that soon enough the human kind shook off their wits and became even as frenzied beasts. They ran abroad, smiting blindly all that crossed their path. There was blood upon all things. The unburied

## MEETING OF AUTOS AND ESCHATA

dead lay in the streets. Thousands threw themselves down from the house-tops in despair. Tens of thousands sprang into deep waters. The rivers, choked with decaying bodies, were puffed up into sullen lakes. Nature was in putrescence. Unutterable stagnation fell upon the earth. Trees stretched blackened arms to heaven. Unclean things littered in palaces. Ships rotted in harbours. Night and day were confounded, for that which, in former times, had caressed and enlivened the world was now effaced, blotted out, and glowed but rarely as a dull, red stain behind the living clouds. About this time, too, the fiends began to swell in size.

AUTOS. An inglorious end!

ESCHATA. Ay, it came, the end. We lived, three of us, alone among the dead in a land where, in olden days, a thousand cities had sparkled in the blue æther. We watched over one another and scraped dark holes beneath the earth's surface to escape from them. For they had grown frightful in size, and in audacity beyond all belief. The very air was tainted with their breath. We lived, my child and I, so long as he, the father, yet lived. But once, looking out into the leaden twilight, I saw our defender stretched upon the ground, his face upon his hands. They had not yet left him. I swooned away. . . . Alas! And

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

while I yet swooned the end indeed had come. For they entered, and, upon my awakening, the child in my lap lay dead. One of them yet hung upon his forehead and drained the blood—his swollen flanks palpitating with joy. But his frail waxen wings availed not to carry off the scarlet burden, and he crawled into a corner and looked up to me with his eye. Then I took up a club and felled him. I was drenched with blood. . . . Then others came. . . .

## Belladonna

*Miss Dorothy Melville to her Mother*

‘MY DEAREST MOTHER,—I am quite well and I hope you are the same. When are you coming back to England? Please come as soon as you can because you have already stayed away so long and you are so far away. Aunt has given me a most beautiful workbox, which I like very much, and I am longing to show it to you. I am sure you will like it too. It has been raining hard for two days and I am nearly always indoors.

‘Aunt has just been here and has read this letter I am writing. And she says that she would gladly take me to you if you would allow her. Will you? I would be so happy. But she also said that I am no trouble to her and that she will keep me here as long as you like, and that she will write to you in a day or two. But I do so want to be with you.

‘And she also says I am to write and tell you exactly about the two Fortescue children although



## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

it will take me an awfully long time to do so and I think I shall never do it. But she says that you will wish to hear all about it as you know their mother so well, who has always been so unkind to them, and aunt says that I ought indeed to be thankful to have a mother who is not like theirs. And I think so too. So I met Bertie Fortescue on Friday morning. And you know he is only four years younger than I am and ever so nice, and I often used to play with him and his sister Daisy, almost every day. But I never liked Daisy so much as him because she often spoke so naughtily, although she is only five. And then Bertie told me "Let's go for a run to Oackley woods" because you know he and Daisy are nearly always alone and their mother does not mind a bit what they do or where they go to and their nurse has her holiday. So I said yes and we went, but when Daisy saw us go she shouted so much that we had to take her too. And when we got there Daisy found a beautiful little cherry tree with black cherries growing all over it which I never saw before, and just the same colour as her very own eyes. Because Bertie's eyes are blue. And she said that they were wood-cherries and that because she had found them she was going to eat them all herself. But I told her she was a greedy, which indeed she always was. And then Bertie said, "I say. I know. Let's have

## BELLADONNA

them for tea all three of us this afternoon and let's invite mother as well, and let's pretend and send her a real invitation as if it were a real party." And so Daisy thought a bit and said:—

"All right. Let's pretend."

'And she got all the cherries, lots of them, and filled them into Bertie's sailor hat and got her hands ever so messy with them. And we carried them home to their room and never let her eat a single one of them, and hid them in their old doll's house. And then they asked me to write a real invitation, because I was the eldest, for them to leave on their mother's dressing-table. So I wrote it out just like this,—

"Mr and Miss Fortescue desire the presence of Mrs Fortescue at tea this day in the old nursery. There will be cherries."

'Then Daisy went and pinned it on to her mother's dressing-table where she knew she would find it soonest when she came home. I could have written it much better for them but I had no time as I had to run back to aunt for luncheon. But at luncheon aunt told me that I could not go to tea with them because she had promised to take me to see Mrs Helyar that very afternoon. So I ran and told them about it.

'And then they told me that their mother had also said she would be away the whole afternoon

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

and could not come to their party and that they were to mind and be good children and that her maid would take them for a short walk at half-past two and that afterwards they could have their tea alone and do what they liked. But Daisy said she thought it nasty of her mother always to leave them alone or to send them out walking with her nasty maid. So Bertie got quite angry with her and said, "What will Dorothy think of you if you go on talking like that? You mustn't talk like that, you know you mustn't, Daisy." But I believe he thought so too.

'At last they said they would arrange the party just as if I and their mother were coming all the same and pretend we were there all the time.

'And when aunt and I drove home from Mrs Helyar it was nearly seven. But aunt allowed me to stop the carriage at the Fortescues' house, because I had told Bertie I would try to come and see them when they were all alone again after their party. So I ran along the drive and up the steps and into the house, but I did not see either Mrs Fortescue or anyone else in the house, although I heard the servants below. And then I went up to the old nursery and saw that they had eaten up all the cherries from an empty plate on the table. But Daisy was lying on the floor with her black hair all over her face and never spoke a

## BELLADONNA

word to me. And Bertie sat still in a corner of the room. Then I thought they were only playing some game and pretending, you know. So I went up close to him but he looked quite white and his face was so unhappy that I got afraid and ran downstairs to aunt. Then she went up to the nursery and came down again and sent some of the servants for Mrs Fortescue and drove herself and fetched Doctor Symonds in our carriage and sent me away home alone on foot. So I wondered what was the matter. And when aunt came home she told me that the Fortescue children were both quite dead and that I must never see either of them again. And Doctor Symonds came later in the evening and asked me a lot about those cherries. He says they were not at all real cherries, but he thinks they must have been planted by the wind from the seed of some plant which Major Arbuthnot brought from abroad long ago into his plant garden. You know he is the man who looks so like poor father.

‘ And aunt says it is funny that a man who looks so like poor father should so nearly have been the cause of my death, as if father already wished me to live in heaven with him. And she says it is a blessing I was spared, and a mercy and a providential escape and a warning.

‘ So now I have told you all and you cannot

## UNPROFESSIONAL TALES

think how much I cried. And I am often unhappy and cross about myself, which I ought not to be for aunt is so very good to me. But I do so long to be with you again. And the Fortescue children are to be buried in the churchyard to-morrow both together, but I am not to go. But aunt took me to see the grave this afternoon; it is full of rain-water and very deep and near the wall where I found the robin's nest with you last spring. So now good-bye. Please, dearest mother, write soon to me, and come.—Your affectionate daughter,

‘DOROTHY.

‘P.S.—I heard Mrs Helyar say to aunt that Captain Beaumont was staying at the very same hotel as you are. If you ever see him, please say that I have nearly done the pocket-handkerchief I am doing for him.’

THE END

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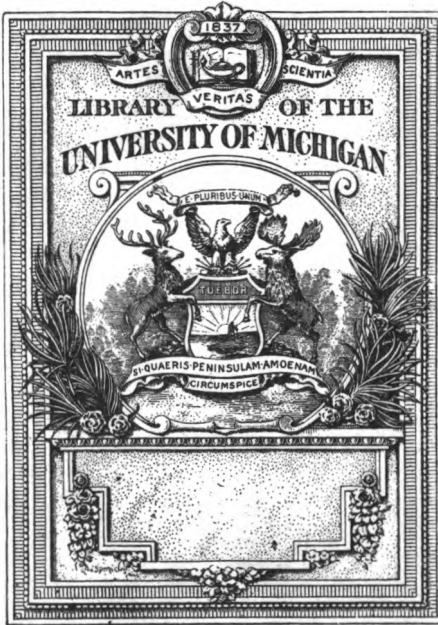
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**BEQUEATHED BY  
THOMAS SPENCER JEROME  
CLASS OF 1884**



